FEATURES
STORIES
POETRY
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overland 91

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John Yule: A NEW LOOK AT THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL GALLERY
Beatrice Davis: AN ENIGMATIC WOMAN
Graeme Turner: A NEW LOOK AT AUSTRALIAN FILMS
Barry Dowling: MARLENE
Elizabeth Riddell: OCCASIONS OF BIRDS

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Temper democratic, bias Australian

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The Australian National Gallery

a new appraisal

JOHN YULE

A Weird Coupling on the Lawns

Anonymous, blank, not the faintest hint of what it is or contains, unadorned by any flash of color or flourish of device across its facade, it sits marooned on the green lawn like a great white machine out of a science-fiction novel, tethered forever to its mother by a long umbilical cord.

Let there be no mistake about this tethering which none of the publicity photos show, this bizarre linkage of the Australian National Gallery to another building. It is no accident. The two were built at the same time by the same architect and then joined by a tongue of cement which exists for no other purpose. The other building, the mother building, is a great compact beast, significantly taller and more integrated, whose huge steel and glass front batters the viewer into submission with brazen inhuman proportions. This building confronts us square on as we approach the two, a very nasty looking piece of goods.

The A.N.G. on the other hand, inexplicably, fails altogether to confront the visitor. Instead it coyly turns its flank on us, a doorless series of concrete slabs. It offers us no access on the approach side. Instead its face is turned submissively to this other monster. And it is from the front porch of the monster that the stark elevated causeway, the umbilical cord, bleak as bone leads across to the foyer of the A.N.G.*

What then is the nature of this parent building we must approach so reverentially before being permitted to embark on the pilgrimage to Mollison's Mosque and the treasure we hope it holds for us? What high spun department of the mind does it represent, what philosophic or metaphysic concept does it enclose, that it can act thus as progentior and dominant lord of art?

Awestruck, we raise our eyes to read the inscription. It is the High Court Building! The High Court, mind you! What incredible absurdity. This must be one of the strangest linkages in all world culture. It is a surrealisic impossibility. For we all know, and have known since Plato, that if there is one ground out of which art cannot grow, it is the law. If there is one human function which is the direct antithesis of art, it is the law. To link an art building to a legal building in such a way that the access to the former is by way of the latter is bewilderingly odd. What is being propounded here is that art has become a subsidiary of the law — sardonic thought!

Faced with this madness, my spirits rose. I began to like this architect. I felt I could trust anyone this crazy — and who could get away with it on so grand a scale. I began to believe that inside his magic box I might find even more astonishing absurdities — the very stuff great art springs from and is nourished by.

But first we have to cross the causeway. Unroofed and endless, obviously it has been installed as an initiatory test to weed out the weak and the unworthy. In the blazing heat of summer, in the lashing rains of winter and icy blasts of most of the rest of the year many a scrawny intellectual and frail Japanese tourist will totter and succumb long before they reach the other end. So much the better — who needs them!

Those who survive come to the entrance. It is not a good entrance. Compared to the High Court facade it is mean, cluttered and indecisive, a welter of round steel posts of differing dimensions,

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** To be sure there is a mean and obscure ramp leading up from the Gallery car park to connect with this triumphal causeway, which you can sneak up like a thief in the night. But that's not what the design concept dictates. It's about as dignified as a fire-escape, something for second class citizens.*

concrete slabs going off at differing angles, bits and pieces of glazing of all sizes and shapes, a hodge-podge of irresolution. And this is a pity because it is, I feel, one of the few unsatisfactory aspects of an otherwise quite admirable structure. If we glance over the balustrade down to the left, at ground level, we can see a far superior unused entrance, simple, direct, austere — what a pity it wasn't placed where the present one is and the present one dropped in a waste paper basket. As with several of the painters we will see inside, Madigan is at his best when he's not trying too hard to impress us.

What about the rest of the exterior? It is a plain honest structure with occasional flukey flourishes (a fake turret, a big meaningless window with bent organ pipe design facing the lake) but here and there with touches of real grace and originality. These tend to be in the out of the way corners.

If you go to the back of the building, for instance, where nobody goes because there is no entrance and nothing happens there, you can meditate with pleasure on the simple planar geometric slabs, nicely aligned each to each, with dark slit windows discreetly inserted here and there. And at one angle of walls, high high up, like an echo from a medieval legend, a knife-edge triangular window, big enough only to accommodate a single person, a forlorn maiden in white samite or a demented escapee from a Ken Russell film with frantic hair and rimless glasses. It juts out suddenly, serenely, a glittering green touch of poetry.

Overall the building has a lumpish shape, or shapelessness. Intriguing volumes of irregular dimensions and basic geometrics bulk out, making the whole like one of Christo's wrapped objects.

Not only does this whet our curiosity as to what each of these blind protruberances may mean or contain, but it helps explain the key governing principles of the architect's intentions. Which was that he would build the structure "from the inside out".

He planned the interior to suit the requirements of the paintings and create at the same time spaces that would continually intrigue, allure and surprise those who walked in them, reviving their spirits and luring them on. And this does happen. The outside is purely a function of the inside. It is a secondary consideration, not a thing conceived around its own logic or demands.

Unfortunately the P.R. people have done Madigan a disservice here. They pound us with the slogan "Masterpieces of art in a masterpiece of art". This is not true: and I doubt if Madigan at any stage thought of his building in that way. He referred to it as "a warehouse to contain the art". No future archaeologist excavating this great hunk of concrete is ever going to compare it to the Parthenon. The inside, though, does come closer to masterliness. But, rightly, acts as an accompaniment and backing to what really matters in there: the contents. It is a masterly stage set, better, more stimulating than any other Gallery interior in Australia, and the man who conjured it for us deserves high praise. "Masterpieces of art in a masterly setting" might have come closer to the mark; I'd go along with that.

Triumphs of the Interior

The moment we pass through the revolving doors the white sterility of the outside transforms into a burning meld of color, an oasis for the spirit chilled by the bleakness of Canberra Deserta.

What hits us first — and yet we are unaware it is hitting us — is the lighting. It is beautifully, blessedly, unbelievably subdued: something I'd never hoped to see in any art gallery at all, let alone a major one. Other galleries operate under a manic impulse to blast each picture with the maximum possible volume of light, so that they become like nothing so much as clinical specimens ranged along the wall of a laboratory, robbed and bleached of any mystery or delicacy. Not here. The light throughout is dim and gentle, a loving light that caresses the works and makes them glow. It has been done, doubtless, for severely practical reasons, to save the pigments from deterioration, but it is also good for the soul.

Downstairs indeed, in the room devoted to "Works on Paper", the bath of photons is so diminished that an anodized aluminium notice to the left of the doorway warns "Low lighting in this Gallery helps to preserve the works on paper which would be damaged by bright illumination. The human eye will adjust, given a little time". It is reassuring to read a notice like this: one feels one is among sane human beings.

We stand in the entrance foyer bathed in this beneficent light and to our left a long corridor leads who knows where; to our right is the cloakroom, bookshop and information desk, and half left is something truly wonderful. It is the first gallery and initially as you enter, it is very hard to know what you've struck. Cavelike and lofty it defeats our estimations because it is like nothing we have ever seen before, anywhere.

Into this big space Mollison has thrown an

anarchy of totally unrelated top quality works to produce a surreal medley of masterpieces: a Fred Williams next to a Tiepolo, African masks next to Mexican idols, Buddhas next to Aboriginal shields, a chaos of creativity—yet so subtly and tastefully selected and placed that it resonates together into a single multi-faceted pulse of sensation.

Obviously he has taken Braque's remark literally — that any good work of art will sit comfortably with any other, irrespective of style or period — and sets out to test this to the limit. This room is a 4-dimensional collage of aesthetic objects from all cultures, all time periods. A very risky and brave experiment — yet it works.

Take the Williams and the Tiepolo which have the entire facing wall to themselves. These two works come from entirely different departments of the mind, they have nothing whatsoever in common except excellence. The Williams is at eye level, the Tiepolo raised way above our heads to the right. Both pictures were conceived in a context of big space and here they get it and something perfect happens. By some subtle alchemy they interact with each other and so totally consume the huge area of concrete they hang on that we no longer see it: they seem to float in space together. Even in the cramped setting of the Temporary Exhibitions gallery in Melbourne, where I first saw it, the Tiepolo breathed out an air of virtuoso charm and felicity but placed as it now is it is enhanced a hundredfold. And the Williams hanging next to the Tiepolo makes far greater (if more mysterious) sense — a sense of harmonious antipathy — than the foolish attempt some years ago in Melbourne to equate this painter with Streeton. Nolan could be said to be a modern parallel to Streeton — a similar palette and thinness of paint, a shared ease of manner — but never Williams, who resembles Arthur Boyd if anyone, with whom he used to go out painting. Williams has Boyd's profound tactility linked with a sophisticated abstract quality, and it is this latter which strikes a remote chord with the Tiepolo.

This is altogether a breathtaking room. It is predicated on the beautifully dangerous argument that aesthetics transcend all barriers of time and culture. Dangerous because in another sense aesthetics are *not* common to all cultures, races and times. Multinationalism, the notion that all peoples are the same under the skin, can be a damaging concept, a destructive force, just as its offshoot, international style (in art) usually is. There is no such thing as an international style: a style is the result of the unique individuality of a people or a person. You can't generalize that. If you get an international consensus of working it tends to mean the participants have sacrificed their individuality to achieve it. If they have sacrificed their individuality they have sacrificed the very ground from which all the deeper qualities of art grow.

This argument can lead us into one of the central conundrums about art galleries anywhere, and this one in particular. How can any such structure be arranged to suit the needs of pictures of very different kinds — in the case of the A.N.G., how do you design a room which will at the same time be sympathetic to the sensuous eroticism of a Courbet head and the explosion of dagger-like shafts in a Hans Hartung? They demand, ideally, different kinds of setting, and so it would at first seem an impossible task. But there is an answer: if you create a gallery space which is itself artistic, which has its own aesthetic rightness, then a resolution emerges. Those works which are in the same mode as the space will be seen immediately to harmonize with it, but other works in other modes will not be deadened but will merely be seen from an unfamiliar but sympathetic context.

And this is exactly what happens here. The interior on the entrance level and on the lower galleries level is in a style closely akin to the surface dynamics of non-objectivism — and to the classic arm of it at that. The Albers, Sophie Tauber-Arp, Brigid Riley, Malevich look eminently right. But the Rothko, Olitski, Kline sit there very nearly as well. With Pollock a gap begins to open between painting and wall, with de Kooning it widens, with Jim Dine it is quite distinct and by the time you get to the photo-realists they are seen to inhabit a completely different mental dimension from that of the creator of the concrete drop against which they sit. But no matter: they still sit well on it because the wall has its own integrity and they have theirs.

In saying all this we have moved out of Gallery 1 into Gallery 2-3, which is the main hub of the building and central to the ethos of the place. This is a big space-age salon devoted to the American School, its European founding fathers, its offshoots and parallels. If you like, the International Modernist section.

This is the core of the A.N.G. and it raises a cloud of questions.

Is it right that an Australian gallery, Australia's key national gallery, should throw the

emphasis here? It's not a matter of rights. It's a matter of two things, perhaps three: availability, relevance, and the taste of the Director. What *does* matter is whether we get a good collection, a good line up of excellent paintings. What does matter also is that there should be some interlinkage between them, some feeling that an overall idea governs their assembly under one roof.

And this we do get. James Mollison is very much an individual and has been able to achieve an enviable independence of action and choice. For ten years he brooded on the waters and finally created this sparkling new world for us. In one very real sense this is a Mollison Gallery — and nothing can be better than to have that sort of thing happen, to have one strong voice at the centre of the selecting process. All then depends on the calibre of that person, and the evidence here shows us a man of widely ranging and sound sensitivity who has homed in on real quality again and again. Because it has happened this way an internal consistency to the entire collection is apparent. If there was a single governing word to encompass the whole I would say it is elegance.

But what about that notion, so dear to the cultural intelligentsia, of a "well rounded collection"? To hell with well-rounded collections! It is a fatuous and debilitating notion at the best of times. We haven't got one here and thank God we haven't. What we want is a house full of great works. Masterpieces are what matters, not historic or stylistic continuity. Art is outside history. Its historic attributes are not even secondary attributes, they are merely one of several dozen things that feed into the making of a masterwork. It is always the masterliness of the statement that matters — with, close alongside, the quality of the concept expressed. The true task of any director is the putting together of just the right number of masterpieces, major and minor, to fill the space without ever crowding anything, and then stop. Comprehensiveness is not important. What the masterpieces are is academic. What is omitted is academic.

But what about the multiculturalist argument that we live in a world of increasing interpenetration and intercommunication and therefore we can (or should) no longer consider our own culture in isolation — that Japanese and pygmy and Eskimo art should be given equal rights and status in any gallery? This is all part of that fatally defeatist notion of our age, egalitarianism — the idea that somehow everyone is the same and should be seen as such — and worse, that all mysteries, all subtleties, all complexities should be shorn away and simplified so that no one, no matter how moronic, will ever feel baffled or discriminated against. It is against all evidence. It is one of those notions cooked up by the left side of the brain in defiance of fact and sense, a fabrication of the reasoning faculties divorced from the animal self. We are none of us equal. It is the differences that enrich us and make life interesting. And on which all great art has always rested. Predominantly Australia today is still part of Western culture, and for the majority this will have been the mental climate in which they have been moulded. For any such person Western culture is and must be *the* culture. Where we see echoes of our feelings in the artifacts of other cultures we respond, but only in a partial, tangential way. A non-African will never see or feel a Benin carving in the same way an African would. But he will find an echo in himself of what went into the making of that carving, and re-create it into his own mode of vision, as Van Gogh and Lautrec did with Japanese art, or Picasso with African. In other words we can plunder other arts — and they can plunder ours — and all this is quite healthy. But, while conceding our country is an ethnic mixture, it seems only sensible that if one group unquestionably has the numbers the art of that group be given priority in *the* National Gallery.

Thus all the other arts are, at the A.N.G., given smaller space. And there is a wealth of good stuff collected here. The same applies to other offshoot productions such as pottery and similar crafts, and photographs. These are richly strewn around and provide a sort of mental furniture enhancing the setting in which the main contenders, the paintings and sculptures, perform their charismatic acts.

Gallery 2-3 then is the big arena. I've never been a lover of American art, nor of non-objectivism. It is therefore from a position of considerable prejudice that I say this is a very persuasive and attractive gallery, with at least one marvellous encounter of the highest order. So much always depends on context and it is not until now, placed where we feel they were always meant to be, that the big names of the collection fully come alive. We come into this main room past a few frivolities like the Tinguely machine and the Baj collages, up to the decorative (but not much more) Dubuffet and only then does the pounding big-name wall come into view. And because we come upon it by this light-hearted and trivial approach its inherent seriousness and depth is unequivocally revealed and emphasized by con-

trast. There in one tight bunch we see the Pollock, the 2 Rothkos, the Clyfford Still, the Hoffmann and the great black brooding Soulages which no one seems ever to mention though I can't imagine why. This wall and a half simply brings one to a jarring holt. Whatever one's artistic preferences, this sight cannot possibly be dismissed. Conjointly it is the most solidly whacking array of optical drama I have ever seen anywhere. It's a genuine stunner and, unfortunately, it tends to make the rest of the room look a bit squeaky and thin by comparison. It is the second great moment of the Gallery.

Even so, the remainder of the Salon has much to offer. The Joseph Cornell boxes are a joy, the Ozenfant is splendid, the vast Colin McCahon religious panel is endearingly nutty. A Morandi still-life has a wall all to itself and there is a desolate and effective Warhol of the Electric Chair. A furry dark thing by Jim Dine called "An Animal" and, at the far end of the wall space is the hideous "Bob", ten times life size, whose pimply stupid face unfortunately looks like going down to eternity with every sweaty pore gleaming away.

At this point our gallery tour grinds to a halt. We find ourselves faced with a plain wooden stair. This is never a thrilling prospect. Where from the basement we have the choice of ramps, escalators and secretive spiral stairs, here there is just the routine wooden job. It is, regrettably, an omen of what is to come.

The Australian Section

At the top of the stairs we enter the Australian section and everything changes — for the worse. This is the one disaster area of the project. In place of soaring and adventurous space we are now given cramped and monotonous space. A low concrete roof presses down on us and an array of very ordinary hallways and cubicles lie before us, as dreary as any department store.

The explanations offered, that Australian art up to the 1960s was domestic in concept and scale and intention; and that Mollison in his youth felt that Australian works looked better in the old Melbourne National Gallery in Swanston Street than when they were transferred to the new premises in St Kilda Road, both need to be scrutinized carefully in the light of the result as we see it here at A.N.G.

Mollison has a good eye and sensibility, but I cannot go all the way with his reasoning here. I agree with his second contention: the old Melbourne was better. He has retained from that building the polished wooden floors, but done away with the soaring spaciousness it had. He has retained a minor thing and dismissed a major. This seems perverse.

And what weight is there to the other argument? What is all this talk of domestic dimensions? Some paintings here to be sure are classifiable as domestic in size and intent — the Margaret Prestons, perhaps, the Lina Bryans — but surely not a whole era of paintings? Those that are are, by that designation, likely to be modest and minor, but there were men and women all through who weren't thinking in such dimensions. So are we not seeing grander and more ambitious efforts subjugated to the needs of the humbler and less adventurous? Why could we not have a little side salon for the drawing-room works, but give big space for the academicians like Hall and Bunny and Meldrum?

And again, even where the domestic (or, better, intimate) argument is valid we might have hoped Madigan would produce off-beat and surprising small rooms, as he has managed to do in the ethnic section and the works on paper section.

The tiny Morandi still-life downstairs is also, in a sense, a domestic thing. But it is so complete in itself, formally, that it becomes a little universe, a very dense object, quite able to hold its own and assert itself in grand settings. The same could be said of several of the pictures upstairs, and they are choked in these miniature surroundings.

No longer, once we get upstairs, are the pictures grouped according to aesthetic reciprocity, but limply by chronology. Jack is born before Mick, so Jack goes here, Mick there. By this decision the first century and a half of Australian art is reduced to a history lesson. In place of visual coherence there is just a repetitive array of objects that read like a dull text. As it stands of course it will delight the starched ranks from adult education and art history who can tick off the well-known names like beads on a rosary. But is this really what art's about?

Possibly the Director had no choice.

A large cloudy question mark must forever hang over the Australian section of any Australian art gallery. It is the question most of us don't want to discuss: namely how does Australian art compare to world art?

Our sportsmen and women can be world beaters, but have our artists ever been? The only answer is: hardly, if ever.

Yet all the names in our roll of honor are as

dear to us as old family friends. We still want to see them and enjoy them for what they are, even when they fall below the greatest. And so an Australian section simply has to be cordoned off and conducted at a different pace than sections elsewhere.

In particular, the development and growth of an art movement assumes equal or greater importance than its aesthetic merits in many a local viewer's eye, including many a sponsor, donor or expert. To have presented our art solely as an exciting visual experience would have been wonderful (only the post-1960 period is treated in this way) but politically and socially dangerous one suspects.

It has to be admitted also that upstairs the proportion of masterly to unmasterly works goes down many points. Aesthetically there are acres of dullness here. Von Guerard for instance is given a whole room to himself, and there never was a duller, more pedestrian painter. A single Piguenit canvas nearby, of mangroves, eclipses him in one go with its panache and mastery of glowing light. The section devoted to the Australian impressionists of the 1880s has surprisingly few large works and the smaller works are disappointingly fragmentary: nevertheless Conder's "The Gray and the Gold", McCubbin's "Backyard" and Roberts' "Picnic at Box Hill" are splendid examples of what these men could do.

The Academicians of the turn of the century and beyond all invariably tended to do less well when they tried for the grand manner and the big career-orientated Salon pieces, but could do dazzlingly beautiful things when painting purely for the joy of it, as with Meldrum's "Irises", which is superior to his larger "Poland" nearby. The Ambrose Patterson self-portrait is also exceptional.

As we come forwards through the 20s and 30s there is a marvellous Cossington-Smith miniature "Cabbage Garden" — reminding us once again that the bigger she painted and the older she got, the worse she became — but not much else of note.

We become lulled into mediocrity and then suddenly something quite marvellous happens: we walk into the Arthur Boyd cul-de-sac, and then on to the Nolans, Tuckers and the splendid Perceval "Negroes at Night", one of the great images of that era. Boyd's primitive bushlands with their elemental figures seize on very deep levels of our subconscious and his "Brown Room" is hauntingly doom-laden. Joy Hester's "Child" is quite terrifying and by contrast the Nolan "Landscape" has the glowing first-light-of-the-world innocence of a Giorgione.

I have, however, never been able to subscribe to the consensus view that this artist's "Kelly" series, here shown compactly but not in full, is excellent or his best. The series attempts something large and admirable but I feel we must be on guard against confusing intention with actuality. He only partially succeeds. Nolan's incredible eye can pick up flashing essences of landscape that no Australian painter before or since has equalled, for instance the absolutely splendid image of a country town depicted in "The Watch Tower". But the figure of a policeman he has placed against it diminishes it to my mind. The trouble as I see it lies in the fact we are presented here with an indigestible combination: one part of the picture is an image from reality, the other an image from an image, for though Nolan saw the town he never saw the policeman, nor Kelly, nor any of the other dramatis personae. Only their photographs. His eye and brain have therefore worked differently on figure and landscape here, so much so that it almost seems as if two artists had collaborated. And of those two, the landscape artist won. Nolan's images from photographs (of things he has not himself seen) lack the sparkle, in my opinion, of those he snatches white hot from the world. If we compare these figures in landscape with, say, his later ones done in Greece, such as the marvellous "Bishop Hydra" watercolor in the Melbourne Gallery, where he actually saw the figure and landscape together, we cannot, I feel, fail to notice the shortcomings in the Kellys by comparison.

Tucker in his array of paintings on the opposite wall, solves these problems much better. His series of oils *Images of Modern Evil* treat human form and environmental setting in exactly the same way. There is no double think. Each is fused and distorted to the same degree. These are the most savage utterances of the period, a truly ferocious wall that deserves far bigger hanging space.

Yet in a sense to confine all these furious and tormented painters of the 1940s in a narrow tunnel under a low oppressive roof has a logic to it. Their works are violent protests against the crushing forces of society weighing on their spirits: their placement here encloses them architecturally in an equivalent milieu.*

After this point, the rooms widen, the ceiling

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* *The Nolan Kelly paintings have now been relocated on the ground floor. (Ed.)*

goes up and we encounter the big performance canvases of the 1960s and onwards. The Whitley "Christie" painting is one of the best here, but as a sheer show stopper I'd put my money on the Jeffrey Smart "Corrugated Giaconda", a hilarious painting if ever there was one, an unforgettable "found image".

And at the end of these halls — as was the case downstairs — we finish on a less than marvellous note with a club-footed horror piece by Peter Booth: it is only kitsch horror, though laid on with a trowel — a glance back at the 1940s section shows how wrong he's got it all; his cartoon flames wouldn't singe a mouse.

Relationship of the Gallery to the Community

Who is this Gallery for?

Paid for out of taxpayers' money, erected at our capital city as a prestige symbol to the rest of the world, and so on and so forth — is it for the overseas tourist, to impress him or her? Is it for The People? Is it for artists and art lovers?

Regrettably these categories have inbuilt areas of conflict. From the literature put out by the A.N.G., from the look and feel of the place, there is a heavy implication that this is a Gallery for The People and for tourists.

Stephen Gilfedder, the Public Relations Manager, says they estimate a million viewers will pass through the doors in 1983 and that the vast majority will be once-only visitors. A lot of these will be overseas people on a one-day stopover, doing Parliament House, the War Memorial and the A.N.G. at high speed, back in their plane by nightfall.

And the Gallery is geared for this. It is regrettably in no way a gallery to contemplate in — though they do provide very comfortable leather chairs and sofas all over the place. It is an impact gallery. A wham, bang, and thank you Mam machine for processing the masses with culture: in one end a slob, out the other an enlightened member of the 20th century (or at least tainted with enlightenment).

No one could ever pass through it and not be affected, no one could ever forget the visit. Love it or hate it, it jolts you and sears an indelible trace on the memory. At the Information desk there is a Visitors' Comment Book and it makes good reading — about 2/3 for, 1/3 against, but all emotionally charged: "Terrific", "boring", "terrible", "a holistic image, ecstasy personified" (that was from Robin M. of N.S.W.). Jurg K. of Switzerland disagrees: "Not special, 99% rubbish" and Johan P. backs him up: "an excellent example of how the moron taxpayer has been ripped off yet again". Bob from Queensland says, "Biggest heap of bloody rubbish ever seen", but their voices are outnumbered with "Very weird and interesting" (Fiona G.), "one should spend weeks here, it's wonderful" (Ruth S.) and "I shall return" (Elaine C.).

As I walked round for three days there was plenty of evidence of this medley of opinion. One white-haired man sat down opposite me as I was gazing out a window and said "Good view here — better than most of the stuff in there", and the air was thick with "what's it supposed to mean" or "give me a pencil and draughting paper and I could do you one of those in half an hour. no worries". But also there was the lady with two children in front of the Monet "Waterlilies": "He shifted his shadows around and deliberately put in wrong shadows to make the picture balance better", and the bespectacled student in the coffee lounge lecturing the bored sexy girl, "What I like about it is it's *really* selective!", to which another thin student rejoined, "Yes, but a very sterile setting."

The big fault as I see it is that gearing things for the Masses and for tourists seems inevitably to involve noise. If you're excited enough by the art works — and I was — you can ignore the massive distractions here, but their existence cannot be denied. Mums with squealing kids, Les Pattersons blabbering in loud voices, Uncle Daves looking worried and aggravated and shouting, "Ya gotta have a bit of imagination to understand these things, I reckon."

There is very little peace anywhere, except in spots off the beaten track. Down in the water garden I was sitting thinking about the Brancusi "Birds in Space" when an extremely elegant young man with curly hair strolled in, attired in immaculate slacks, a striped shirt, soft straw hat and sunglasses, like a vision out of "Last Year at Marienbad", and slowly and thoughtfully examined each work in turn. This is what one might hope to see more of.

It is not really a gallery for artists or art lovers. Or, shall we say, it is not the sort of gallery where you can look long and lingeringly at a work and establish a deep and secret rapport with it. It is not like the Brera in Milan, for instance.

Perhaps different temperaments require different conditions. Just as some students seem able to absorb texts with transistors blaring in their ears so too the razz-mataz atmosphere at the A.N.G. may suit a certain kind of viewer who would be

put off by the polite restraint of the National in London. But it doesn't suit me, I know.

By all means it should be open to the public and no impediment, no subtle barrier should make any visitor feel inadequate or unwanted. But it should not be geared to their misconception of what the appropriate conditions should be.

So long as this gallery remains the noise box and fun fair it now is, very few uninitiated, perceptively unawakened people are going to be able to get the message, because the conditions mitigate against getting it. I would like to see a high priority given to exploring ways by which the noise level could be reduced. People, after all, accept the idea of relative quietness in cinemas, references sections of libraries and similar places. Why not here?

On the other hand it can be said the contents of the A.N.G. are mostly not deep-contemplation works. From the Sienese "Crucifixion" to the Tiepolo to the Pollock (which looks so lyrical and light-hearted between the Still and the biggest of the Rothkos) the emphasis is on easy flow and a sidestepping of darker waters. The Courbet hints at greater depth with its dreamy eyes (which photographs falisfy), perhaps also the Rothkos and occasional other works. But on the whole the messages here are swift and suave.

So you can go through fast, your nerves can be seized upon and worked over and you come out exhilarated and a bit bewildered. If you want to go into depth about any of it, it can be done the Wordsworthian way, recollected in tranquillity some time later. The A.N.G. proposes that the picture-viewing process is something like seeing a play or a film. You go in, you get a lot in one solid injection and then you leave. It's not a gallery to go back to — each return would, under the present conditions, be increasingly unsatisfactory because the distractions would intrude more.

The security is also obtrusive. Ladies at the cloak room who ask you to open your bag to make sure there's not a bomb in it, guards with walkie talkies so that just as you're concentrating on a painting a tin voice at your elbow squawks "Nineteen, this is Control. Over!" It's space-age all right, but is it conducive to that mysterious interchange between the viewer's sensibility and the multiple levels of meaning embedded in the painting's surface?

Though genuinely distressing these aspects nevertheless are minor. The major virtues of the place far outweigh them. The overall impression is of a fine establishment, a total art work, a world-ranking gallery. A gallery in which the proportion of good to dreary work is remarkably high. It is an idiosyncratic and opinionated entity as any real work of art should be, and it delivers its message with authority and flair. If it doesn't project any national ethos it is certainly full of good art. The hanging, framing and lighting have all been given careful and tasteful attention. A ship of real treasures gratuitously berthed in these wastelands of bureaucracy.

As I was wandering around the outside of the building at twilight, photographing the last rays of the sun glittering on that terrible causeway, my every moment watched with growing suspicion by the lone police patrolman outside the High Court Building, something suddenly caught my eye. Everyone had left the building, there was not a soul around for miles, as if the whole of Canberra had been by divine edict evacuated and abandoned for ever. But in the deepest shadow along the wall of the gallery I caught a glimpse of a figure moving. It was a fat man in shabby clothes and a torn leather jacket. He moved silently down a flight of stairs into the black obscurity of a colossal archway and emerged on the far side at the edge of the sculpture garden. He walked without pausing to a wooden bench and sat down. He sat down facing the statues. He leant forward and gazed at the Rodin figures, at the Maillol woman, at the Bourdelle. He sat there for a long time without moving, then got up slowly and walked away into the night.

John Yule is a Melbourne painter and art teacher.

UNTITLED ROTHKO

Taste of tomato up in the sky,
treeheads to circle, pipes to play,
lakes to duck, sopcrust chucked and sinking.
Picnicjuice spits in the blood,
a baby tomato's brainseeds
spill out on the cuttingboard.

Red gangles, red drips,
spreads red flamingo buoyant —
a sucked-jujube red, a dribbling-dye red,
Valencia holiday,
carnival of roses!
an unknown soldier bleeds for joy.
Under frilly trappings, a bruise fruits and feeds,
a live stone, buried too deeply in the belly.

When I look up through the water
the whole gallery's broken down dancing;
you see I've grown by a couple of holidays!
My mind's a gelati icre-cream,
crazy peach sherbert, mysterious chocolate,
getting it together in the spring sun.
I notice as we head for the car
your preoccupied beauty —
I reach over. My hand strikes you
just above the heart.

MARGO LANAGAN

FRONT PAGE

This isn't a movie.
It's a family newspaper.
So 500,000 front page readers don't
see the soldier-sailor's wife's bra
coming, coming off — they see it off
where she's seeing him & he her
for what could be their last time.
She'll take off her bra again
only when he returns from the war,
she says (Many happy returns!)
& if he doesn't return, well,
she won't take off her bra for
anyone else for at least three weeks
& then it won't be a spectacle, just
as it won't be this front page bra
stirring the crane driver to hook
the already unhooked bra delicately
on the steel hook of his steel arm &
lower it like a stork leaving twins
in the arms of the soldier-sailor
who'll keep them under his pillow or belt
while the crane returns to the crane's
inverted question mark, dangling.

GRAHAM ROWLANDS

CULTURAL COMPLEX, BRISBANE

Cave-like, pitted, poised in its overhang
along a river
colored liquid coal;
and catfish are floating belly up.
A prison is built by politicians, vague figures
bereft sometimes of ideals:
it is granite and blind to our portrayals.
A pity they attach a label to these walls;
asylum? Half built, the ribs just
like missiles left by a last survivor.
Art and dreams are not gone utterly, each with
those who see them, perhaps to dream of spending
their lives turning around and around with
impossible ambitions; hopes whose enormous
proportions otherwise become distorted.
I sit in the shadows and watch over the river
north, to the city. Somewhere an artist faces south
across the world to this horizon, sees
a relic of a dream take form. *Art!*
the expensive gesture. He says *Who's there, out of sight?*
Who's the hurting one, the one most likely to create?

BARRY O'DONOHUE

SHE MARRIES AN AGEING ARTIST

When he thinks of his last wife
you hand-thresh the shadow from his lips, his groin,
place there a book, a branch not yet broken,
the voice pitched a flute higher,
still a bit crisp with England —
to make of her a salt-pillar,
craning back to an obscure city.

He immerses his hands in your face,
his body in your hands,
he sings your faint-bloom-of-gold face
to his friends to his pictures the skies,
he calls you walking behind him,
and draws September light crackling with crow calls.
He hears you cooking, your enquiring voice,
and a fine jagged lace pours onto the walls.

You're folded on a chair or thought
when he blusters in, moaning;
you wrap him like a Klimt cloak,
keep him perfectly still, and in your throat
mother sounds, lover sounds —

Hold onto this lion,
hold onto this minehead,
this cartload of stone roses
overturning at the top of the village.
You can never make it a sure house,
but the horrendous flapping in the doorway,
you must, you must stop it.

MARGO LANAGAN

THE $20,000 BED

Where she arrived years ago, like a skydiver almost
degutting concrete —

braking to the amnesiac's dead fall over white, a
thin skin sighing out articulations . . .

This is room 426. And by morning 5 a.m. the nuns are
already busy (in this room where a mezzotint

of the pope faces an alcove in which the virgin also
floats behind blue plastic flowers)

After the bed wastes have been removed, the sheets are
stripped, a switch activates

the motor which whirrs elevating the bed as the clamps
move across . . .

while this patient, almost dank twenty-five-year-old
female vegetable with shaved blond hair

(a trunk only)

is lifted naked and dangling tubes — on this bed
which is now separated into two parts

by cantilever rods, the upper and the lower . . .

(although she feels nothing, absolutely nothing —
they insist)

being lifted, she shrieks high and thin as a child

as she is washed, as she is given to the sponge
and towelled.

Meanwhile, the gears rotate, the bed tracks and
swivels . . .
in which the patient is held and turned

through 90 degrees as the shadow, also distorted,
and held aloft in clamps, revolves

like some obscene eucharist among the scentless
flowers . . .

To the accompaniment of this high pitched keening,
where the nuns are spreading laundered sheets:

— it is the morning offering in room 426
— as the first prayer of the day before mass
— and, more remotely, just as the moon is going down.

PETER LLOYD

AFTER PENTRIDGE

1.
i waited outside the gate
apprehensive & you were late
on the day we went into the prison
as poets.

trembling, i let the officer
run his metal detector over me
& his hands thru my bag.

you smiled, asked me
if i was scared, i nodded &
asked for coffee, but the staff room
nad run out, i made do with water.

2.
the man with the popeye forearms
& wrap around shades
laughed nervously & talked too much,

the boy with bloodshot eyes
read a poem about solitary & talked
kurasawa & beckett & artaud, he said
being stoned on coffee's like
the tail end of a speed jag

& the man in screw's boots
was tender & soft voiced
when he spoke about his wife
after a contact visit.

we observed a patchy protocol
never quite sure. said, see you later
when we all knew how unlikely that was.

3.
it was no shock that they were
ordinary young blokes
down on their luck

but i felt like i'd been jogging
in a minefield in the dark
& scraped thru the barbed wire fence
on the other side.

4.
for fourteen hours a day
they live in tiny rooms
painted black with despair.

the education centre smelled
of cabbage & old smoke, when
i opened the window
they looked out anxiously
afraid of being overheard.

5.
when i left with my words
the gate's numb thud
sounded like a sentence
in an empty court

i couldn't forget
red eyes that looked like crying
& dark uniforms that proved
that their wearers were real men
on the right side of the law.

JENNY BOULT

JACK'S RETURN

'Jack's back.' You say it strangely
part fear part gladness
The snake's return was not expected

A dried sheath of skin hangs down a verandah post
'The bastard's up there again all right'
squeezing its green under our roof

As a son we'd find him heavy going
casting off coats willy nilly
We like things in their proper places

Luckily for us he rarely shows himself
For all *he* knows our roof's a tree
It's easier to accept than understand

Last year we called him Jack
If you name a thing you take it as your own:
it lessens something of its foreignness

When friends call we say he's harmless
It's looking to ourselves the discomfort starts
denying our hearts an alien son.

IAN WILLIAMS

SALT

It's not that the salt has lost his savor.
Here's sea-salt, coarse and granular.
It's like so many stars in my hand
When I look with the eyes of William Blake.

Fish meat cereal fruit speak louder
When salt is silent. I shut the lid
But keep a handful and meditate
On custom, usage and superstition.

Did you eat his salt? Did you sit below?
Spill some, throw it over your shoulder?
Put bread and salt on the common altar?
Travel the trade-routes named for salt?

The Lord made a covenant of salt with Aaron.
With this handful I pledge my word.
With this pinch I labor, earth-bound,
To catch the tail of the singing bird.

Outside my door, all over the country
The trees die back, the dams go dry,
The salt spreads thinly: white like snowdrift
In patches after the first spring-thaw.

The grass has withered around the salt-pans,
The map's now colored white and brown
And children change their game's old catch-cry:
"The Salt-man's coming. All fall down."

ROSEMARY DOBSON

SUB-TROPICALITIES

1.
we do not always
trust our determinations
sinking deep under beaten tracks
to wake up promises unattended

nor the river of our wanderings
meandering uncertainties
upon the shore of forgotten islands

2.
all this begins when news
of a day's coming downstream is
mystery still & the night is keyed in

we seek louvreplays of light
across the calm, to feel the strength
of this vessel lest doors slam on us

3.
ark of a morning
we listen to wings beating

4.
in the midst of chanced glimpses
was it the raven that has flown
we look again at the raincurtained sea
& a stare, startled, takes wing

in these sub-tropicalities
our wellmeaning journeys illumine dusk
when sky & lake are no longer cloud
yet of the stare snared in the rushes
is it not our arrival in trouble
5.
eminent traveller, retrace your river in flood
count how many there are on the last weir
how many there were that melted icebergs
of recognition on your palms

& remember those of transit
planets, eternal journeys; burnt
bridges & razor-edged ridges.

RUSSELL SOABA

BETTER A GORILLA

Not to mention
feeling equine
(now I'm
bedded fed
and watered)

sudden talk of
taxidermists has
me quieted
complete —
sleep.

I know you'll need a spot to
hang your shirt here.
I'll set a stuffed gorilla
in the corner,
promise.

Yes it is unlikely
(it's a wonder).
We're not flogging
dead horses
at all.

JANE ZAGERIS

BABYLON

Your future understatements mingle
with streamlined voices thrown
at your door. You're shy
of thick fingers that won't break.
Now description fits with an aura
centred around phone fixations
like calling China from a pub
and it's not STD.
You're told electricity no longer
lives in Asia, so why break your heart?

You embrace black tea. To say
"I promise to remember when
you had blue hair" really is being
sentimental. Underneath my mattress
the drumkit is on fire until
a final postcard makes sense.
You'd never believe she'd fuck *you* around.
The mirror falls over thrice, so
you exchange it. Conclude that
monogamy must be good for something, when
it's three in the morning and heartburn
a domestic fantasy for something else.

DIPTI SARA

DRIVING

You get into the car
In your helmet with your blood group written on it
And your fireproof suit
With the inflatable cushion between you and the
dashboard
Do up your seat belt, then you drive off carefully
Obeying the speed limit all the way

Around the corner comes a crazy in a panel van
Involved with some chemical or other
Who wants to end it all
And he doesn't mind if he takes you with him
Red light runners make you dig your nails into the wheel
A bikie gang tries to run you off the road

Arriving home, you turn off the engine
Sit in silence for a moment
Your little boy runs out, jumps in your lap
He grabs the wheel
"Broom! Broom!" he says "Brrrrrrrr!"
You close your eyes.

CAROLE WILKINS

HE'S WATCHING ME

1
One who we know
is forever shining,
slope-handed silverbells
in his ears,
dressed in the hems
undone by others,
preaching like rags
in a wardrobe.
Nobody dares to steal
this kind of god!

2
After he'd plastered the
ceiling,
they blasted
the old bunker
to pieces.
Everything fell!
so did the ceiling!
Never found out,
what he'd thought
of his craft.

3
Why HIM?
Why not HER?
Or IT?
Or THEM?
Imagine: THEM . . .
The multi-layered nightmare
a la D.T.,
(a sandwich of dried eyes)
watching me,
joining me.
scribbling with me
on paper.

JOHANNES WATERMANN

BARY DOWLING

Marlene

I have my bright face on, and my look of attention, I'm nodding and smiling but not really listening. I'm thinking about the Japanese man last night, about half of them are Japanese. This one didn't take off his glasses the whole time, his skin was the color of yellow sand, some are quite brown, which I prefer. But the Japanese men do not, they are fascinated by my white body. My mother pours tea and I accept one of her biscuits then my father begins talking about how dry it must be for farmers, soon he'll start talking about the old place and I've heard it all before but I still have some interest, about 10%, I'm 90% bored, but feeling virtuous about being there. The Japanese man wanted all the lights on, and no bedclothes, but the room was well heated. It is the sight of the white caucasian body that turns them on. All men are the same about other races, women too, but in their secretive and more passive way. Women make up more stories than men. The Japanese man had two bottles of champagne in the room but we only drank one. The other remained by the telephone which he'd used to call me. My parents don't know what I'm thinking. They also don't know what I remember:

My head stuck out of the milk can like a cork in a champagne bottle. My feet and legs were warm in thick wool and the milk can strait-jacketed me. From where they placed me I could see the engine room with its noise and wheels and belts and pulleys, and the yard full of massive beasts who waited with patience, resigned and cud-chewing, or who rode each other with bisexual randiness till they wore the hair from the hide. I could also see the length of the shed where eight cows stood in a row while a machine sucked at their swollen bags and where my father and mother moved swiftly never stopping never hurrying never slowing, releasing a cow, guiding another, washing tits and udder, putting on suction cups and taking them off.

I could also see into the dairy where the milk was piped and slid over a cooler into a stainless steel vat big enough to swim in. Froth and foam dropped from the cooler and fed our ring of cats below who were spotted and lathered by it. My parents passed me constantly in their work and nearly always smiled or shouted something at me or tousled my hair, because they knew I wanted to get out. But they were most often grim, for it was a grim life, hard and constant. I never remember them at rest. I stood in that milk can every morning for nearly two years, my brother used to help my father with the evening milking, after he got back from school.

My father *is* talking about the old place. A small part of my attention is all that's needed to please them. It's my appearance of bright attention that has always allowed me to do this, at school, at work, and with the escort agency. But it's only appearance, just the way my face looks, bright dark brown eyes with clear whites, and sparkle, someone told me I look both mischievous and kind — what a splendid whore's face I must have. I also have good hair, brown with a long curl in it and a lot of lustre. I'm thirty-one and continue to worry at what's nagging me, the feeling that unless I take some right action soon I could strait-jacket myself into some other milk can. The hair at the back of my neck rises and prickles, then subsides.

I remember when they installed a radio in the cowshed and turned the music loud above the noise of the engine. Once there was momentarily nothing to do in the shed, the cows all milking, it was raining and the cows steamed and the dung steamed and the milk above the cooler steamed as my father turned the radio louder and my mother turned to my father with an old smile and danced, waltzed, in the rain, in their gumboots, in their oilskins, among the steaming cows in the concrete yard, my father staring over my mother's

shoulder, his face thin and tight from the work, his eyes always red from the work while my mother's wet face lay against his wet oilskin and when the waltz finished they walked back and tended the stamping cows as though nothing had happened but I laughed loudly and clapped my hands inside the milk can.

I'm not a proper whore. For ten years I've worked at ICZ first as a secretary then in market research where I have a responsible and professional job and most of the people I work with have university degrees. I don't get as much as the graduates but it isn't much less and I've got full staff benefits and I don't think I'll ever leave. They still haven't found out that I'm not very intelligent, that it's my face and my hard work that carries me. This escort agency thing I do is only casual. I did it once for three months a few years ago, now I've been doing it again for two months, not every night, though it could be. I do it for the money and for the contempt I feel for how things are arranged, men and women, my parents working like ants for a pittance while one man I was with told me he was a lawyer and earned $1000 a day for not much work at all. I think that's sick, no man or woman is worth that for anything whether they are life givers or kingmakers or anything. I also do it for a certain contempt, or carelessness, I feel toward myself, I have never been gentle with myself, always ready for a risk or a dare. I don't really know why I do it. Also, I want a proper man and I know this is one sure way of not getting one. I know another man, a psychiatrist who I thought might be proper, I liked him, he wasn't a client, and we went out together for a while. I told him about the lawyer getting all that money and he told me he got about the same. It cooled me right off him and he couldn't understand it, explained very gently that it was largely government subsidy, made it sound as though it was the government's fault, but I just died away from him. I'm not sure what I meant to him, something fairly strong though, and it knocked him back. I was sorry for I hate hurting people and hardly ever do but I couldn't help thinking that if I'd hurt his heart he could always go and hurt someone else's pocket and I know what my parents have paid to smiling doctors to attend their injuries, and their kids. But now Mum and Dad are into every pensioner racket they can find and I'm glad they've learnt at last, but it's only because they have to.

Another cup? My father suggests, my mother pours, I hold out my cup and chat and smile. I feel a whore with them sometimes, for it's what I do with the men, give them my apparent bright attention and a tiny part of my mind while I'm thinking about something else, for instance this nagging, this knot I've been worrying at, it's beginning to come loose I think. What will I find if I un-knot it? I know, I have decided, that today I will decide to quit the escort work, but I haven't decided yet, I need to do some more unravelling. I sip the black tea, we all have black tea in our family, hardly any dairy farmers have milk in their tea. They are playing at Do You Remember? They often do it on my visits now that they've left the farm and retired to their small country town but I only go a little way with it then steer them away for what they have to remember is squalid and revolting slavery and they and thousands like them worked their guts out for nothing, and still do. But they don't remember it that way.

I do. Sometimes I'd yell and scream when Mum lowered me into the milk can but I don't blame them because they both had to work and you can't let a toddler loose among cows' legs and machinery and one of the neighbors' kids, also a girl, was killed when her clothing was caught in all those fascinating belts and pulleys. There was no door between the cowshed and the dairy, just a gap with a chain hooked across it and my milk can just inside the dairy part so I could see everything. Often a cow would come and stare at me over the chain, her ears moving like radar dishes, they seem to stare with their ears as much as with their eyes, then she'd stretch her neck out over the chain and I would feel the hot soft snort of breath thick with the smell of clover. If I moved or shouted the cow would back off in quick fright, but if I stayed quite still she would stretch out her incredible tongue for the final satisfaction of curiosity, out till it could warmly rasp my face, and hair. Then I would laugh or cry or pull my head into the darkness of the milk can and wet my pants.

I don't know why I come to visit my parents like this. It's partly because my brother won't. I come about every two months, I put it off as long as I can, I hate it, but I still come. My brother hasn't been up to see them for nearly two years. What irritates me is that they have no resentment, no awareness of the futility of their past lives, and yet, when they finally sold that farm and paid what they owed they got out with just enough to buy this small house in their country town nearby! And live on their pensions! They have just enough to look after themselves and their house and garden and run their small car. On Sunday afternoons they

drive round the district, look at the old place and neighboring farms. And they actually still work sometimes, an occasional relief milking on one or two of the smaller herds, and they both go along, Mum limping as she has for twenty years since a cow stood on her foot and mashed up a lot of tiny bones that nobody could do anything about. They are very proud about still being able to do this work, think they are marvels, they are paid peanuts and cackle wickedly that they are paid in cash and do not show it as income, then they spend most of it sending presents to their grandchildren, my brother's kids, and my brother gets over $30,000 a year as an executive in an agricultural machinery firm, plus perks. They show me the thankyou letters the kids write. And they're happy.

I like my brother a lot. I depend on him as being one of the few people I can really talk to, and he feels the same. I like his wife and family too. He is a bastard in some ways, but I understand how and why. He had it harder than I did, working after school and at weekends and holidays, milking, tractor work, haymaking, really hard work, not because our parents were slave drivers but because that is the way those farms are run. As older kids we used to hide in the barn and smoke and one day he took a piece of chalk and wrote on the barn wall in huge letters I HATE COWS. I have never hated cows, I think they are wonderful animals.

I put down my teacup and light a cigarette and tell them I must leave soon. The time has come for deciding and I decide quite calmly that I will quit the escort business. I am more relieved than I expected, but more frightened too, for I suddenly see that it means I have decided to face a lot of other things. I have loosened that knot completely but it lies in my lap like very loosely tangled wool which I have only to take a needle and lift out the right strand for it all to be free. I am not ready to do that but see it can be done. Before I go I give them the tickets I have promised them, for a tour of the Border river area by bus and paddle steamer. I have arranged something like this for them the last three years though they say they're just as happy at home and it's largely true, but they get tremendous pleasure from me doing it and I know they tell other people "Marlene really looks after us", they will tell people on the paddle steamer that "the daughter packs us off somewhere every year". They take the tickets with embarrassment and love and I leave.

It takes almost three hours to drive back to the city in my nippy little car and about half way the road goes over the range. It is quite dark by the time I reach the top and park the car for it is here that I have decided I will make my next decision. Actually it is already made, it is to make a real effort to steer my life along a less harmful, more proper course, before it is too late. But I stop at the top anyway, to examine this, and confirm it. The top of this range is a special place for our family, and we always used to stop here when we drove to the city. Firstly it is a beauty spot with a marvellous view of farmland and bush, then it's halfway to the city so a good stop for a spell, and it's a watershed, the river that runs close to our old farm rises here and also the one that runs in the opposite direction and through the city. If I could follow the water in my car I could freewheel to either of my homes. But neither is home for me. If I stood in the right place and shed a tear from each eye . . . I tell myself to try and think it out properly, I may not get to this point again. I forget tears, light a cigarette, wind the window down and let the cool night in. There is nothing to be seen but night and the glow of the city in the far sky. I try and think it out. I put myself through it.

I question myself, and answer:

"I've quit the escort work, for ever.

Why?

Because I'm locking myself into something, no, locking myself away from something I need.

But why did you ever start?

For a dare, a lark, Vivienne and I giggled at the ad in an off moment and agreed we'd apply, if the other would. Then I couldn't back out.

That's not true is it?

No. But it was an off moment. The promotion at ICZ and all that money, work I like and that is demanding and fun and beaut people, all to research markets so they can fake up some product for a new lot of suckers, yet it makes sense in a perverted way and I do like the job, but I hate the system. Then there was Peter.

Peter Pearce? From the old district?

Yes. He'd been at me for years to marry him. He was spending a fortune trying to run his farm and come to the city to court me, sleep with me, get me to marry him. He was heading for a breakdown.

Did you love him?

I never allowed myself to.

Why?

For gods sake! You know why. Because you can't ask a man like that to give up the farm his parents have left him if he wants to marry me.

And I wasn't going to leave what I had to marry him.

So you gave him the boot?

I couldn't just give him the boot. I'd been doing that for years, he was in love with me, properly, his farm was running down and he was too. I hurt him, badly, to make him stop pestering me, and at last he did.

Did you love him?

I never allowed myself to. But perhaps I did. I probably did. Yes, I did. Then a lot of other things happened after the promotion. I'd arrived. Nice people were nice to me, I'd got into good living with intelligent people and plays and books and music, and I'll never leave that, and then I began to think about politics for the first time and if you work for ICZ and think about politics you have to go a bit mad, the system seemed so deliberately insane, and I'd think of Mum and Dad and how they'd worked to educate us so we could lead rich and happy lives and be entirely cut off from them. I gave up, then Vivienne and I did see that ad and we did back each other into it.

And you gave it away? Why?

Because I'd simmered down, come to my senses a bit.

Did you like it?

Don't be silly, no one likes it. The whole thing is a mad charade. The only thing it did for me was to excite this feeling of self hurt, self destruction, carelessness, contempt for everything.

Oh?

It was a sort of Russian roulette. The something terrible I felt ought happen to me could happen each time.

And when you went back the second time? It was because of the doctor, the psychiatrist?

Yes. I fooled myself there, I was getting myself ready to fall properly for him those first few weeks and then I learnt about that thousand dollars a day and it sickened me. I mean what's the difference between a thousand dollars a day and five thousand a day? It's mad. And his justification was slimy. But I went out with him again, with a cooler head, and probed a bit, his values, attitudes. He was a nest of nastiness.

So you punished yourself again?

If that's what it was. But I've stopped now, and I won't start again.

Why? Why now? Why today?

I don't think there is any special reason except just coming back to the bush again. It's just all boiled up. I've been in a tight knot for a long time. I knew if I didn't do something very soon I'd, disintegrate.

I'm glad it's all come up. Be gentle with yourself now, won't you?

Yes. I will.

Tell me. What's your private dream?

You know it. I'm lonely. I'm sick of looking after myself. I want to look after someone else, be looked after. My dream is the same as any teenage shopgirl's, that a proper man will walk up to her counter one day and it will turn out that he's been looking for her all his life, a knight in shining armor on a milkwhite horse, except that for me it will be someone who looks like Peter Pearce and he'll be riding a beautiful black and white friesian cow with a bursting udder . . ."

And now I'm bursting into the tears that I've held like memories. I'm punctured. It's like whooping cough for a start, and fairly dry. Then I gush and tears and dribble get all over the steering wheel which my head bangs every time I whoop. My nose starts to bleed when I bang it on the wheel again and it's not like whooping cough any more but like being violently ill, and it goes on for ages till I just can't do it any more and I lie with my head on the wheel and my nose dripping and I don't care, about that or anything at all.

When I get out of the car and mop everything up the wind has dropped and the clouds vanished and there are all those stars and I can see a bit. I can see the log where we always used to sit and have our cup of tea. When we stopped, on our way to town.

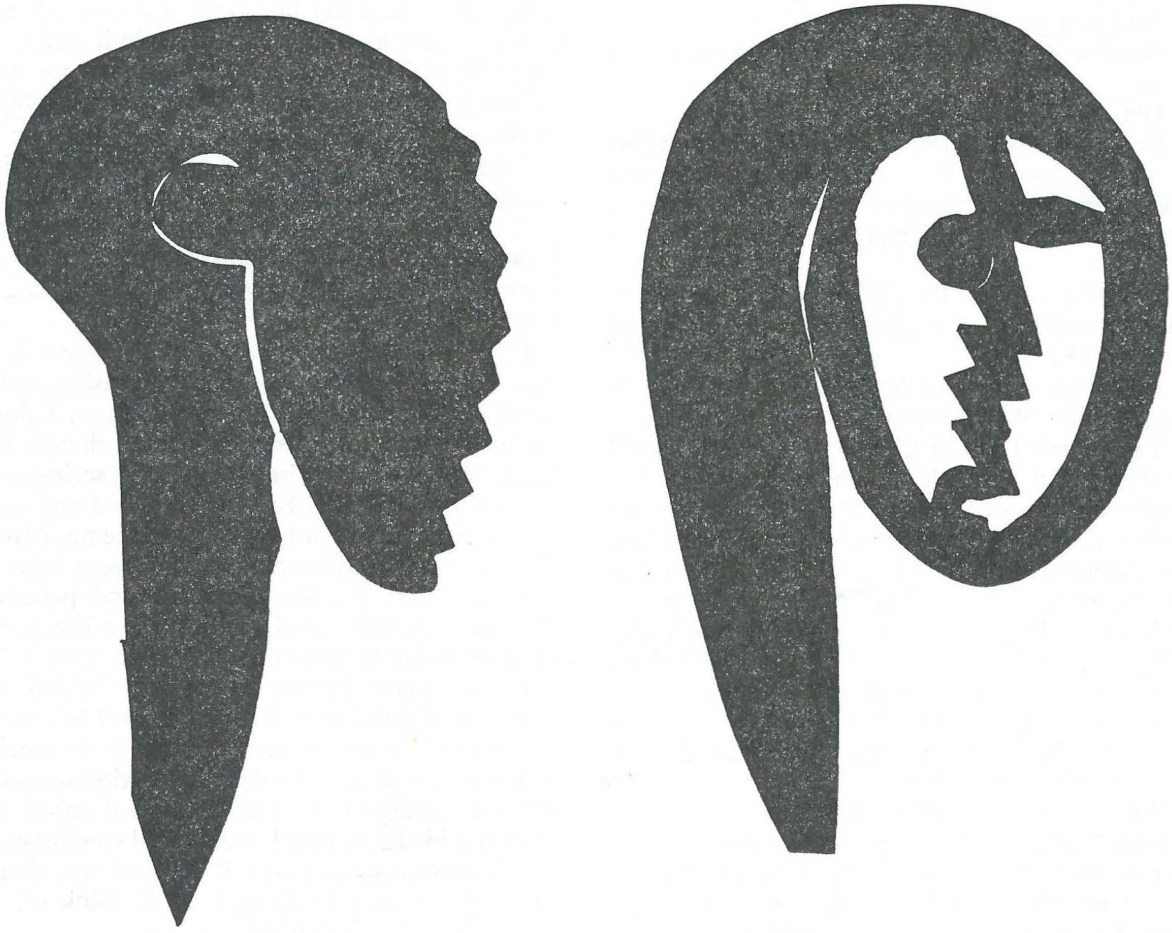
I'm in a stupor driving on. I only drive a little way before the glow of the city vanishes and I won't see it again until I'm nearly there. I don't despise my parents, or my childhood, though I'm not going to the opposite extreme and seeing it as everything wonderful. But it wasn't bad and a lot of it was good. It's just that I keep seeing it from the city. This city/country thing is very hard to bring together, it's like diamonds and potatoes, they have nothing to do with each other, yet I keep on trying to find out which is the most valuable and Peter Pearce is properly behind me now. I really did love him but it *couldn't* work and it went on for so *long*, we were both wrecks, it had to finish, and I might have tried to make the lies I told him come true, that I despised the bush and his farm, that I could smell cowshit even on his city shoes and that it revolted me, that I did it for money, anything I could think of. It doesn't matter, it's finished.

I have no one except my brother who would

understand. But I won't go to him. It's finished. I'm going to go back down there, into that city, and fit myself into the insane system and be very gentle with myself, for however long it takes, till I can handle it, or I get some support, or . . .

I think it'll be all right.

Bary Dowling has been a farmer or a professional gardener for most of his life. Recently he returned to his home district near Ballarat, Victoria, after a long stint as a farmer in Northern Tasmania. His poems and stories have begun to appear quite frequently in recent years, in Overland, The Bulletin *and other journals.*



Joel Elenberg

swag

THE NEW GOVERMENT. As this issue goes to press, the Hawke government has been in office little more than a month, working, apart from announcements relating to the economic summit meeting, in an atmosphere of eerie silence punctuated only by the sound of bulldozers churning along the Franklin.

A long way from the euphoria of the early Whitlam years! Certainly we did not expect this to be repeated: recent sad histories have tempered our imaginations and the time itself is sober, if not glum. Nevertheless it is curious, and a little worrying to see a government in its infancy already wearing the cares and disappointments of late middle-age. Already we have been conditioned to expect little, not only in the way of increased expenditure in such areas as the arts, but little immediate change generally. Surely this is very odd. Granted that this government has not and will not produce a bigger cake we would still have expected the cake to be divided very differently indeed, and the division to be vigorous.

Sadly we are getting used to Labor governments being little different from their conservative oppositions. The record, for example, of the Wran government is hardly exciting or encouraging — even if it did produce a Premier's Prize for literature! In fact Wran's policies on minorities, notably aboriginals but others as well, are lacklustre, his handling of police and prison issues a disgrace and his general lack of innovation remarkable in a leader with such a mandate. One hopes that Hawke is not to take a similar line even though the NSW Labor machine, which has done so much to keep Wran conservative, is strongly represented in his government.

There are many areas both in general policy and in arts policy which need reform *now* and which do not call for extra expenditure. In welcoming Mr Barry Cohen as Minister responsible for the arts we welcome also, with only a few reservations, the government's arts policy developed under the previous leadership of Senator Susan Ryan. We hope that Mr Cohen can adopt and expand this policy vigorously and identify himself with it. It is not too early for him to make an announcement and we await it with some interest.

It is understandable that the Minister needs time to catch up in an area in which previously he has not been expert but he should not be swamped under the weight of the briefings currently being offered. Arts administrators are notorious for producing loads of paper and for endless surveys, reviews and ongoing enquiries. We have had quite enough of such art bulldust; we watch with irony, touched with despair, the proliferation of arts bureaucracies at federal, state and even local government levels. We note how little they change even when governments change. In Victoria, Mr Race Matthews is no doubt an excellent arts Minister (ably assisted by Mr Bruce Grant) but, so far, we see little difference between his administration and its predecessor. The emergence of arts careerists unconnected with either the practice or the expert study of an art has been a feature of the last decade. And a blight. Mr Cohen will be surrounded by such careerists often as concerned to preserve their bureaucratic fiefdoms as to promote an art or an artist.

One way in which to reduce the influence of the non-creative bureaucrat — and here I should acknowledge those few creative administrators who are still to be found in the general desert of arts administration — is to decentralize the Aus-

tralia Council. For more than eight years I have been associated in one way or another with that body and I have yet to see in my regular trudgings up to Sydney any genuine reason for all the federal bodies supporting the various arts to be housed together in one place. The present administrative design is a typical creation of the arts bureaucrat; it looks good on an organization chart. It also concentrates power at the top and when we look at the top at the present time we find a laughable (and highly expensive) surplus of senior management. This is the state to which the 'expert managers' have brought us.

Overland has protested on various occasions about the concentration of federal arts administration in one place. Here is an area where small is, indeed, beautiful and where regular casual contact between the sponsors and the producers of art can mean so much. Reform here would not cost a penny and Mr Cohen should give his attention to it at the start. It might be good to see the Visual Arts Board, for example, housed in Canberra, next to our greatest contemporary collection, and the Aboriginal Arts Board moved closer to its main constituencies. However, I imagine any such suggestions at best would only be put "under study" subject to a lengthy report in two years time, a report which undoubtedly would be written by a word processor rather than by a live person.

During Mr Hawke's economic summit meeting the television cameras panned over the faces of the delegates, nearly all of them male and middle-aged. If we had been there doubtless we would have looked the same but we could not fail to remark how grey those faces seemed, how unillumined despite the spotlights. One longed for the light of imagination or of hope to touch the prevailing grey, for a hue of compassion about the submerged fifth of our population in poverty. Certainly the generality of those faces did not seem as if they were looking towards 'the light on the hill'. In fact we doubted if they saw the bloody hill at all.

But these are early days. Super-caution will undoubtedly give way to vigorous prosecution of new policies, study will change to activity and Hawke take wing rather than be an also-Wran.

SILENT CRITICS. Turning from the new government to a more general comment it is curious that, at a time of the greatest crisis in capitalism for fifty years, little fundamental criticism of capitalism itself is being made, or, if it is being made, it is certainly not getting beyond the small coteries. No doubt this is one of the many malign bequests from the Soviet dictatorships: we have lost the habit of considering alternatives. And in fighting that evil Russian imperialism we seem to have been brainwashed not to consider fundamental problems of our own society, of the structure and the functioning of capitalism in the late twentieth century.

One of the saddest aspects of the whole economic crisis is that the young, one-third of whom are unemployed, do not seem to know what has hit them. Certainly in every mail there are poems and stories from people in poverty but never do their reflections go beyond the personal. Contemporary society has added its own particular cruelty: nowadays the young are not only surplus to the economy but dumb.

CHRISTINA STEAD. We were saddened to learn of the death of Christina Stead, a great writer who had a long association with *Overland*. My own friendship with her was comparatively recent and slight but that of Nita and Stephen Murray-Smith was close and went back many years. They used to visit her in England at Surbiton. It was on such a visit, after the death of her husband, the novelist and banker, William Blake, that Stephen added his strong influence to that of other friends, persuading her to return to live in in Australia. *Overland*, with the Literature Board's help, was able to assist her return.

Christina Stead was born in Sydney on 17 July, 1902, and died there on 29 March, 1983, with all her books once again in print and having known the love and praise of her peers. There is often put forward a view of her as neglected, true neither of her work in its end and its beginning nor of her life itself. Though she never stopped missing her husband, William Blake, who died in 1968, she was rich in family and friends. Certainly there was a period of neglect in the middle years, a time (1952-1966) when she published nothing and little was written about her. But, as Dorothy Green has written 'she sprang to critical attention, in her own country, as well as overseas, straight away, even if Australian firms were slow to publish her work. With her entrance on to the literary scene in 1934, it was plain that a new,

unique vision had erupted into Australian writing, a vision which had about it a touch of genius, rather than talent.' I remain grateful to an early essay by Marjorie Barnard (1938) which fired for me, as for many others, a love of her work. Her career began and ended in applause. At least two films currently are being made from her novels. More will follow.

There are twelve published novels and one collection of novellas. (There are probably some as yet unpublished works.) On our cultural map they are a major mountain range. Their unique quality comes from a marriage between a romantic sensibility, exploring language anew and teeming with life, and a sceptical, analytic mind capable of the coolest observation. In her masterly understanding of human relationships she, like Balzac, was one of the few novelists to give an important place to money, what it meant to have it or not to have it. For those who have not yet read her I would recommend they start with *The Man Who Loved Children* or *For Love Alone*.

It is curious for a romantic to have no illusions. Yet such was Christina. Her long residence in European cities formed her as did her time in the United States. She and her husband were blacklisted from film writing and they had close friends among the Hollywood Ten. She loved Manhattan, was its true denizen if not citizen, and carried its memory with her to the end.

My first meeting with Christina was at an *Overland* dinner party. She was not only a great writer but a person of the highest quality. Everyone who met her experienced this distinction immediately and yet it is hard to explain. So vividly present in the recollections of many yet she eludes definition. A couple of things she said to me that evening might go a little way to convey something of her charm and of her quality at once both modest and formidable. In talking of the seriousness with which students at Monash approached her, and of critics in general, she said, "They do not seem to understand that sometimes I like to be frivolous. And so does my writing." She went on to say, as she said on many other occasions, that she was a 'naturalist' and did not make up or imagine her characters. "They are all real," she said, "they all existed and their actions all took place." In reply I said one could of course see her father (D. G. Stead, the marine biologist) as the principal character in *The Man Who Loved Children* and she agreed. I was about to ask was she herself the basis for the portrait of Louie, the eldest daughter when luckily I thought of the novel's denouement and quickly changed the subject!

I have, too, a very vivid memory of her at a large party to farewell her Melbourne friends given by her close friend, Mary Lord. Incidentally, it is comforting to know that in Christina's last years in Sydney Mary lived close by and saw her all the time. At her party she sat in a large armchair and, despite her modesty, there was something regal in the way she sat with many people lined up waiting to say a few words. Looking across the room I saw that she was likely to be besieged for quite a time. I had decided not to join the queue and add to the strain when I realized that there were a couple of practical things she had asked of me. I went over quickly and said, "Christina, I won't bother you now but etc., etc." "Nonsense," she said softly, "first of all get me another drink and then sit here." When I returned she held my hand to stop me going. I still remember her hand clasp. Quite relaxed, but very firm in its intention. And very warm. It is this warmth that so many of us remember.

ENVOY. This issue completes my term as Acting Editor and I hand things back to Stephen Murray-Smith with sharpened appreciation of the amount of work, plain drudgery some of it, needed to operate even a little magazine. Some of our correspondents seem to think we have an office and a staff. No office, no staff, just us honorary stamp-lickers. It has been heartening to find that so many readers feel quite personally about the magazine as the many notes attached to subscriptions show. It is good too, to find that *Overland* is a genuinely national magazine and that we reach some very distant parts. I had not realised how we supply a kind of community to quite a number of people distant from the bigger cities. Are writers returning to the land? Recently I've had farm news from New England, northern Tasmania, the Barossa and the Atherton Tableland. I had not fully grasped, too, what a large number of talented poets are living just now in South Australia.

Another thing that has touched me are the donations offered and promised from those who plainly cannot afford them. Thus the $2 "because I got a bit extra in my pension cheque", or "have now got a laboring job and will send you an extra five dollars soon". I think SM-S would agree with

me to accept the accolades and refuse the money in cases like this.

Of course not all is sweetness and light: occasionally I've been accused of male chauvinism, our reviews have drawn some barbed comments some of them lengthy and well argued, now and again a subscription is cancelled, and, the old perennial, of course we keep some manuscripts far too long. But if everyone who submitted work subscribed we could afford a part-time office.

I suppose what I'm clumsily saying in all this is that *Overland* reaches a genuine audience, beyond the coteries, and I have a new sense of it and a new appreciation of it.

Barrett Reid

BEATRICE DAVIS

An Enigmatic Woman

Colin Roderick's carefully researched biography of Miles Franklin* shows his scholarship, his patience, and his undertanding of a writer who shrouded herself in a cocoon of mysteries. Why did the author of *My Brilliant Career* and *All That Swagger* go to such pains to hide her identity as Brent of Bin Bin whose *Up the Country* and *Ten Creeks Run* so vigorously evoked the Australian squattocracy of the nineteenth century? What prompted her obsessive fear of sex? Dr Roderick convincingly explains it all with acuity and detachment, sparing neither the woman nor the writer in psychological and literary judgment.

Most young people would have heard of Miles Franklin only through the film *My Brilliant Career* — if they had noticed the name at all among the credits; and there are few older people now who would have known her before or after her return to Australia in 1932. She died in 1954. I first met her at meetings of the Fellowship of Australian Writers and of the English Association where she was always a magnet and a star with her impertinent wit and forthright views, with her generous encouragements of younger writers, her insistence that they should proclaim their Australianism — and to hell with the literati enslaved by models from abroad. Miles would then have been in her late fifties or early sixties; and she enchanted me. Through these meetings and through my association with her when I was on the editorial staff at Angus & Robertson, I am proud to say that we become friends. I think she trusted me — though not sufficiently to reveal any of her secrets. "If I don't tell you," she said, "you can say you don't know: you won't have to lie."

Miles Franklin's family background is documented copiously in this study. No doubt she was aware of her genealogy; and it is significant that the writing name she chose, Miles, was that of her maternal great-great-great-grandfather, Edward Miles, a Cornish convict who arrived with the First Fleet and who, "free by servitude" married the convict girl Susannah Smith at Parramatta in 1803. Their Currency daughter, Martha, married William Bridle, who had also been transported and who soon prospered in the colony. Their daughter, Sarah Bridle (Miles's much-loved grandma at Talbingo) broke the emancipist chain when she married the German-born immigrant Oltmann Lampe. And so the descendants of emancipists mingled with the gentry to produce the squattocracy that inspired most of Miles Franklin's work. She always declared herself a snob, in spite of her determined egalitarianism.

On the Franklin side there was the Irishness Miles so loved to exaggerate, notably in Danny Delacy of *All That Swagger*. Her paternal grandfather, Joseph Franklin, son of a schoolmaster, came from Limerick to Australia with his wife in 1838, later to take up land and settle with his sons at Brindabella, not far from Talbingo (near Tumut) where William Bridle and Oltmann Lampe had joined forces. When John Maurice, youngest son of Joseph Franklin, married Susannah Lampe, their first child, Stella Maria Sarah Miles, was surrounded by a bewildering tribe of aunts and uncles and cousins, material enough for a lifetime of literary endeavour.

Stella/Miles had an idyllic early childhood. Disciplined with protective kindness, she was much loved, praised for her sharp precocity, encouraged in her individuality (unless she became too "froward"). Her happiest times were spent with her grandmother, Sarah Lampe, at Talbingo, not far from her parents' property at Brindabella in the

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* Colin Roderick: *Miles Franklin: Her Brilliant Career* (Rigby, $20.)

high Monaro. She was the eldest of Susannah Franklin's many offspring, as Susannah had been of the Lampe brood, and was nine years old when the family moved from Brindabella to Bangalore, so that the children could go to school at Thornford. Here Stella, trained to fastidiousness by her upbringing, despised her classmates as mannerless and inferior. She had no secondary education.

By the time she was seventeen Miles had high ambitions and strong opinions; she was simmering unbearably with the deep discontents that were to boil over in *My Brilliant Career*. It is interesting that her character and her views were never to change. Proud, sensitive, egotistical, resenting the male dominance taken for granted, despising the dull or menial chores thought proper for women, angry at their burden of childbearing, she lashed out at men and determined never to be any man's slave or to bear children. Yet there was nothing "tame-hennish" about her mother or her Grandma Lampe, and she dearly loved her father and her Grandpa Franklin. Dr Roderick thinks that lack of self-confidence was at the root of her aggressiveness; that her sense of inferiority stemmed from the startling beauty of her sister Linda, while she herself was small and had a snub nose. He invokes Freud and Jung for explanation of her obsessions, linking them with fear of death, fear of snakes, a liking for being photographed as a horsewoman with a whip or a stick or even an umbrella.

My Brilliant Career (the manuscript had been taken by Henry Lawson to London) was published in 1901 by Blackwood; and no one was deceived by the male pseudonym. Members of the family who saw caricatures of themselves were rather amused than perturbed — not deeply shocked as Miles later suggested; and the most gratifying accolade came from A. G. Stephens who declared this to be "the very first Australian novel". The Franklins had moved to Penrith and Miles continued to write furiously — without success. (*Some Everyday Folk and Dawn* did not appear until 1909). In spite of her high principles and pretended contempt for men, this restless young woman was an accomplished coquette and did not lack admirers, of whom the most bravely persistent was her cousin Edwin Bridle. He even promised they'd lead a platonic life and have no children if that was what she wished. In a state of emotional confusion, influenced by Rose Scott and Vida Goldstein, she fled in 1906 to America. I'll skip over those years of hardship, working in Chicago with noted feminists for the National Women's Trade Union League and for the journal *Life and Labor*: logical enough for a woman with her outlook but unproductive years except perhaps in crystallising her nostalgia for Australia. At least she was courted by two attractive American men.

Grandma Lampe having died in 1912, and her parents having moved in 1914 to a cottage in Carlton (Sydney), Miles sailed to England in 1915. In London she avoided the suffragettes, though she'd met the Pankhursts. Barely subsisting with menial jobs she hated, she joined the Scottish Women's Hospitals organisation in 1917 to serve as a cook or "orderly" with the Serbs in Macedonia. She enjoyed this experience with men who were lonely and ill, until she was stricken by malaria and invalided back to London in 1918. During her convalescence she wrote — unsuccessfully — under various male pseudonyms, and in 1919 joined the National Housing and Town Planning Council as a clerk. Further bouts of malaria plagued her and in 1923 she took leave to sail home to Australia.

Colin Roderick believes that the idea of the Brent of Bin Bin saga was brewing and that Miles Franklin needed to see her old haunts again to create the lyrical landscape that is its background. This may have explained the preoccupation or withdrawal her mother mentioned in a piteous letter that followed Miles on her way back to London:

> I often had a feeling that you were miserably disappointed with the whole thing and wished you had never come . . . I would often have loved to have taken you in my arms and kissed you, but you seemed averse to any affection . . .

Miles was living in High Holburn as H. M. Baker. One wonders whether she admitted to being Stella Franklin even in her job. As well as writing plays, invariably rejected, she was no doubt brooding on the Brent series which she saw as an Australian version of Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*. The first of the series, showing her distaste for normal sex and expressing some of her pet antipathies, was rejected by several publishers. It appears to have been a very personal story, urging women to sublimate sex in "high spiritual comradeship". Now aged between forty and fifty, Miles must have wondered what her self-denial had achieved. According to Dr Roderick, she was "reaping the wilted harvest of a ingrained ultra-puritanism originating in a deep-seated defensive antagonism to the male sex and all that contact with it involved". It was fortunate for Miles Franklin that she then met Mary Fullerton.

Mary Fullerton was from Gippsland, a woman with literary talent and as addicted to pseudonyms as Miles was. The spinsters became close friends and it is logical to conclude that Fullerton not only helped Miles in comradeship, inspiring her to pursue her Brent series, but helped more than a little to make *Up the Country* and *Ten Creeks Run* as good as they are (judging by the inferiority of other so-long-rejected novels in the saga). These two novels were published by Blackwood in 1928 and 1930. Dr Roderick thinks Miles had no intention of going beyond a trilogy when she returned to Australia again in 1927 to question her old country friends at Talbingo on details of bush lore that would be essential to *Back to Bool Bool,* which brought the saga up to the 1920s and was published by Blackwood in 1931. Inferior as the third novel was to the first two, Miles now planned to expand the Brent series to no less than six interlocked volumes.

The two minor works, *Old Blastus of Bandicoot* (1931) and *Bring the Monkey* (1933), have no value except in revealing Miles's prejudices and romanticism. "Marriage is the colossal example of carrying love too far." Dr Roderick comments that she could not keep her "obsessive loathing of the carnal aspect of love" out of her mind even when writing a light thriller.

Miles was in London, living in the same house as Mary Fullerton, when, in October 1931, a cable came to say that her father had died and her mother felt lonely and frail. But how could Brent the anonymous leave London and still keep in touch with his publishers and his public? P. R. Stephenson turned up and suggested a solution. I think he respected the confidence apart from giving a few broad hints from time to time. So Miles left in September 1932 to return to 26 Grey Street, Carlton, where she was to live the rest of her life preserving Brent's anonymity. "It was in her nature to deny her nature, to put up a front that would disguise her emerging maternal yearnings." These she was to spend on loving animals and young poets.

With the heaps of unpublished manuscripts she brought back was the half-completed tale of her Irish grandfather, who became the brave Danny Delacy of *All That Swagger*—by Miles Franklin.

Living in an unfamiliar Sydney in the Depression could not have been easy for Miles; and, fond of her mother as she was, they had never been kindred spirits. For all her puritanism, Miles thought of herself as "advanced". Her radical opinions distressed poor Susannah, and legend has it that Miles mischievously shocked her by allowing herself to be glimpsed ironing in her bloomers by tradesmen who came to the back door.

It was more than a blessing when *All That Swagger* won the *Bulletin's* S. H. Prior Prize for 1936. It was greeted with warmth for its authenticity, though criticised for its unwieldy shape and style. Dr Roderick says surprisingly little about its publication and reception and goes on to talk of the confusions with Blackwood caused by the variety of pseudonyms Miles used as agent for Brent. She was fussing interminably about the justly deserved failure of *Back to Bool Bool*—and a great nuisance she must have been to one and all.

Miles was devotedly caring and loyal to her mother during the illness which preceded her death in October 1938. Then she was on her own in the Carlton cottage and it was about this time that I first met her in my role as editor at Angus & Robertson. The book presented was her skit, in collaboration with Dymphna Cusack, on the sesquicentenary celebrations of 1938, *Pioneers on Parade* (1939). Then, using the influence of T. Inglis Moore as editor of the first volume and Douglas Stewart as editor of the second, she induced A. & R. to publish *Moles Do So Little With Their Privacy* (1942) and *The Wonder and the Apple* (1946), slim books of verse by the anonymous poet "E" — who was, of course, her friend Mary Fullerton.

Furphy had always been one of Miles's gods. They had corresponded and she had met him once in Melbourne in 1903 "under the watchful eye of Kate Baker". *Joseph Furphy: The Legend of a Man and His Book,* by Miles Franklin in association with Kate Baker, appeared in 1944. Miles disliked Kate as much as Kate disapproved of her, and there were quarrels over which of their names should have primacy on the title page.

Now Colin Roderick steps in (he became education editor at A. & R.'s in 1945). Aware of the distaste with which most academics viewed Australian writing and of the lack of texts that could introduce their country's writers to the young, he went to work on two anthologies to serve this useful purpose: *The Australian Novel* (1945) and *20 Australian Novelists* (1947). Much to Miles's delight, he included Brent of Bin Bin in the first and Miles Franklin in the second. She was curious at his referring to Brent as "she" and said she'd have to consult "the old gentleman". It was evident to Colin Roderick that Miles and Brent were the same person: same typewriter, same method of typing, same character, which never changed. And though he kept this to himself, it became

obvious to me, too, when Angus & Robertson bravely undertook to publish all six of the Brent novels in the order Miles nominated — the three unpublished ones sight unseen. It says a lot for her personality and persuasiveness that any sensible publisher should have agreed to such madness. And the prize was to be the revealing of Brent's identity when all six novels had appeared. This did not happen until after Miles's death; so the secret that was not a secret remained. I never had the temerity to say I thought her guilty of lying and pointless deception. She could have had reasons that were important to her, and I loved her too much to upset her.

Of the six in the saga only two were worth publishing. With her intelligence, I find it almost incredible that in all those years, with all those rejections, Miles learnt virtually nothing about literary style. She was an innocent who believed that vitality and love of Australia were enough. So here are the novels in the Brent saga presented, I believe, in the order in which they were written: *Prelude to Waking* ("Merlin of the Empiah", "Not the Tale Begun", 1950); *Up the Country* (1951); *Ten Creeks Run* (1952); *Cockatoos* ("The Outside Track", 1954); *Gentlemen of Gyang Gyang* ("Piccadilly's Pants on the Hoof", 1956); *Back to Bool Bool* (1956). The previously unpublished novels were, if I remember, presented as battered carbon copies typed (and much rejected under the alternate titles I've shown) many years before. Georgian House had published *My Career Goes Bung* in 1946. How could Miles have wanted to publicise herself with such an embarrassingly bad book; and Brent with the three previously unpublished duds? I have a theory that it was to help, no matter how meagrely, in getting together enough money for the Miles Franklin Award that was to be her memorial and her statement of faith in young Australian writers.

I last saw Miles during the final stages of her illness, reclining in the charming garden of her cousin's house at Thornleigh. She was frail but cheerful and did not speak of death. We were discussing the manuscript of her essays on Australian writing, *Laughter, Not for a Cage* (published in 1956), and she told me again how terrified she'd been when invited in 1950 to give the lectures sponsored by the C.L.F. in Perth. But, urged on by her great friend Henrietta Drake Brockman, she'd taken courage and done the job with flair and style. Her wit, her defiant disregard for accepted values, her aggressive Australianism, charmed students unaccustomed to such ebullience. Lively work, this — and it's Miles with all her prejudices as entrenched as ever. It's amusing to see how much she disapproved of William Gosse Hay because he was rich and cosseted by women, of Henry Handel Richardson because she was most enviably protected to write when and as she chose. I think I persuaded Miles not to label Galsworthy's Irene a nymphomaniac when she fell in love with Jolyon.

A handsome book enlivened with excellent photographs, *Miles Franklin: Her Brilliant Career* is a work of historical and literary importance. It must have involved endless research and Colin Roderick is to be congratulated on his achievement in assembling the jigsaw and drawing his conclusions. The text is not always easy reading. From the opening maze of the genealogy to the useful chronology at the end, it needs concentration to steer a clear course through a narrative so dense with information about a woman so reluctant to be understood. This definitive study, with Verna Coleman's *Miles Franklin in America* (1981) and Marjorie Barnard's earlier work (1967), surely leaves nothing more to be said about this capricious author of our first classics of Australian station life.

But what about her extraordinary personal charm? It was as a unique individual rather than as a writer than I most admired Miles Franklin. And it was when we were alone, her mask of aggression put aside, that I came to know and love her. It must have been in the forties and early fifties that I'd be invited to have dinner and to stay overnight at Wambrook, 26 Grey Street: no other visitors. Shown to my small room with its tall bed, I'd leave my bag and join her for talk in the fabled Victorian parlor of the Waratah Cup. A glass of port would appear ("I don't drink, but my grocer says it's good"); then, chattering together, we'd go down the dark hall to the dining-room/kitchen where a large table covered with a white cloth would be set with many good things (I remember fruit and cake and chocolates), while Miles, enveloped in a starched white apron, busied herself at the stove cooking vegetables, grilling chops — and talking without pause. (It needs a Hal Porter to recall and record such occasions.) Perhaps another glass of port — or was it sweet sherry? There was no sign of frugality in the ample meal served in traditional country style. More talk and showing of treasures in the sitting-room, then bed, with careful instructions about the outside W.C. and its vagaries. Breakfast in bed, presented on an ample tray by an aproned Miles: two bantam's eggs, tea and toast, butter and jam. Miles had trained her pet bantams to lay

their eggs in an ancient, squashed felt hat that sat on top of the fuel copper in the laundry. I have treasured memories of these visits when I basked in Miles's warmth and kindness, admiring her grace and dignity, marvelling at her vitality and wit. No doubt she did most of the talking, discussing current goings on and people we knew, airing her prejudices ("I'd like to know what that girl's doing with a double bed in her house when she lives alone"), making tart comments about some, loving ones about others. I well remember her affection for poets like Harley Matthews and Ian Mudie; and I'm sure she found men more interesting than women. But never a mention of her private self, past or present. "I won't tell you now. You'll find it all later in my diaries." I've never looked and believe anyone would look in vain for self-revelation. No mention of Brent, of course; and I didn't dare to ask. I wonder if there *was* a Brent somewhere? For the name was inscribed on a man's collar that was found in an old suitcase Miles left behind after one of her visits.

So that was the Miles I knew: an enchanting friend, a personage indeed, and a great Australian whose passionate love for her country was perhaps substitute for the romantic and sensuous love she rejected.

Australia's most renowned book editor Beatrice Davis was awarded the National Book Council's Bookman of the Year Award in 1976.

DRIVING

It hardly matters the make of car or that
it is winter in New South Wales, I drive the night
at impossible speeds

am I trying to encapsulate darkness
(look ahead, the world on our silver windscreen!), to
promise
death can be defied by new alloy wheels and 60-series
tyres?

there are double yellow lines on the road
there are red reflectors on posts beside the road
there are warning signs with figures that glow

at luminous odds with my speedo, we are huddled
behind this V8 and think how the night is fled
across cold paddocks: where in the world are we
headed?

headlights redefine Australia
and I am remembering beginnings (Tasmania,
parents up front in the Jaguar

me behind, craned forward into the perfumed aura
of my mother, at home she played the piano — oh, her
quick hands — but both my parents played the car

though I dreamed I'd fall asleep not to wake,
I loved to watch the speedo's sober white needle
touching 80, even then the car was almost vintage)

now we propel our son through New South Wales,
halogen globes expand his known world, and ours
and though this engine outdoes gravity, who knows

what lies round the corner? (remember the night we
cycled
into Coolah, just lights in the valley, we slipstreamed
the final twenty miles home to where we had never
been)

JOHN WRIGHT

Australian Theatre and the Stage's Wrongs

DENNIS DOUGLAS

Noel Macainsh's recent *Overland* article (No. 89) on the notion of the theatrical classic, and the uses to which that notion has been put in the Australian theatre situation, deserves to be followed up. His unease about the conception of the classic is an unease shared by every theatre person whose work is of value. It would be a pity if that issue were to be lost sight of in skirmishes over questions of a scholarly kind, where Noel's handling of the evidence he mustered left itself open to all sorts of objections.

In the course of indexing the London repertoire of the 1870s I recently came upon a letter written to *The Times* by a German resident in London who was amazed that a prominent English clergyman was stumping the boards of the West End denouncing the traffic of the stage, in particular the lewd seductions of ballet, and urging the London theatres to close for Holy Week. (Five or six of them did.)

Such an exhibition, the letter said, would be unthinkable in Germany where faith in the highest aspirations of literature rested on a continuous experience of its capacity as drama to edify and inspire. The State-controlled theatres of Germany played their classical repertoire — which seems to have depended as much on the late eighteenth-century melodramas of Kotzebue as on Shakespeare, Goethe and Schiller — without objections from crusading dignitaries of the Church.

The exaltation of the classic can be seen here at its purest. The playing of the classical text had become in Prussianised Germany a sacrament in a religion of culture.

We are strongly conscious today of the fallacies and hypocrisies of that religion of culture. We know how intimately it was linked with nineteenth-century liberalism, and we cannot wish to conceal from ourselves the tendency of nineteenth-century liberalism to serve as a stalking-horse for the age's most ruthless and most illiberal forces, in particular for the savagery of the emerging capitalist system. The condescension towards, and deep distrust of, the working class evident in the writings of many of the liberal vision's major spokesmen is the strongest pointer to its limitations.

The most interesting analysis in English of what the experience of the theatre classic meant to a sensitive and intelligent nineteenth-century mind, the more interesting because he was a philosopher and he was trying to be objective, is A. C. Bradley's, and his falling back on Aristotle is instructive, presenting a notion of purgation through intense emotion that bears little relation to the experience of the theatre-goer today.

There are a number of questions that every theatre person has sooner or later to try to answer frankly. Is there any reason to believe that the live theatre caters for any interest of a higher kind than social or intellectual snobbery? Can anything of value happen to the anonymous spectator in the third row of the dress circle? What is the point of his being there? Is the spectacle that unfolds before his eyes essentially, as Tolstoy for example thought, an empty and purposeless charade?

Noel Macainsh posed such questions as an honest man, and he will probably respect my right to call into question his idea that the demand for classical theatre reflects "a longing of the individual to be momentarily released from the choking experience of his dependence on ever more anonymous systems of power". Though I can claim cheerfully to have survived many years of that choking experience — years spent as a lowly Senior Lecturer in the mandarin hierarchy of an Australian university — it was never to the theatre that I went to escape it. Nor do I

know anybody who did. The South-West of Tasmania and the Bogong High Plains, yes, but not the theatre. What happened in the theatre did not cut me off from what happened in the rest of my life.

I have reservations too about Noel's notion that the experience of a truly adequate performance leads the spectator to "acknowledge the healing power of truths that may at first increase his pain". The cadence is so gentle that one would like to assent to it, but the proposition begs one or two questions. It tells me how I might fit the experience into my sense of the nature of things, but I am not sure that it tells me very exactly what the experience is.

There is every justification on the other hand for Noel's rejection of a whole host of illusions which theatres create. If that anonymous spectator in the third row of the dress circle is being persuaded that the social order of fifty years ago is still intact, or ever was an ideal one, if he is being offered a compensation fantasy which induces him to accept without complaint a life of pointless tedium or a society confined and brutalized by sanctimoniousness and greed, he is being sold a pup; and it cannot be denied that many people mistake just such illusions and compensation fantasies for vehicles of truth, and leave the theatre satisfied — quite falsely satisfied — after wallowing for two hours plus in palpable deceptions. What Noel calls "security theatre" has very real attractions. It will probably always draw larger audiences, perhaps even larger subsidies, than any other kind of theatre.

One of the most potent illusions of the modern stage is the sense of sharing in the triumph of the star by being swept up in audience hysteria from the middle of Act One to the moment the lights come up after the eighteenth curtain call.

It is rare for the star at the receiving end of all those plaudits to resist the reciprocal illusion that supplying secondhand emotions to that crowd and raising its level of excitement to fever pitch justifies misinterpreting roles and distorting the balance of entire productions. While the cash is rolling in, repentance for such artistic sins would be professional madness. Stars are a hard-headed lot. They need to be. Their livelihood is often precarious.

It would all be so much easier if one could dismiss from serious consideration all forms of commercial theatre (as Noel Macainsh seems to wish to dismiss all J. C. Williamson stood for) on the grounds that they contribute signally and notoriously to the sum total of human ignorance. Any reasoned justification of stage work today seems to require terms of awareness, and few forms of commercial theatre could truly be said to develop their audience's general level of sensitivity. But without the commercial theatre (or its modern equivalent, a State-financed theatre) the kind of stage I get most out of would be impoverished for want of the skills it derives from its brasher counterpart, and for lack of a *bète noire* to measure itself against.

The true distinction is not the one often imagined, between the wicked commercial stage and the genuinely forward-looking groups led by Grotowski and Kantor and Eugenio Barba. True theatrical achievement is possible in either camp. But it is an extremely fragile thing. It is always rare. It is always contested — there is always at least one well-informed spectator who resists the spell. And though a few directors have a miraculous record of consistency, it carries within itself no resources which can be relied upon infallibly to sustain it.

I want to insist on this notion of theatrical achievement in order to counter the millenial implications of Macainsh's sense of cultural history. The "period of revolt" referred to in his closing sentence which will somehow transform the Australian stage is a misconception, though a misconception of a fashionable kind in Australian literary circles. There is no moment of universal salvation for any cultural activity. There is no moment of truth before which beautiful, sensitive and original work was inconceivable. The general standard of professional theatre in Australia measurably and demonstrably declined as the gold boom faded and then as the movies took over; but before those crises and since its recent piecemeal recovery, the potential for fine work has been there; and even during the Australian stage's four dark decades hints crop up in newspaper reviews and personal memoirs that the spark never quite died.

The real enemy is not commercialism or the star system, the economic matrix or the hypocrisies of the community at large, but the illusory fabric of all theatre work. The actor or director is in the frightening and confusing position of the prince's impersonator floundering in the shallows in the final frames of Kurosawa's *Kagemusha*, groping blindly towards the banners bearing the four emblematical ideograms, wind, fire, forest, mountain. He must refine his sense of reality so that dreams may be compelled into its service, and he must accept that failure at some point is inevitable. The danger of losing

touch with substances in pursuit of their shadows is always there. There are no end of synthetic substitutes for the real joy at the heart of comedy, the real desolation at the heart of tragedy and the real anxiety which Noel Macainsh identifies as the hallmark of the modern vision. The actor or director must be the last person to permit himself to be taken in by counterfeits.

In full consciousness of the abuses to which the cult of the classic has lent itself, there is this to be said for certain 'classical' texts, that they place squarely before the audience the choice between substances and shadows. For that reason there are some authors I would not want the Australian theatre to have to do without, among them Euripides, Shakespeare and Chekhov.

I have to confess that I do not know how to describe genuine theatrical achievement in terms more satisfactory than Noel's. I would be inclined to talk about certain kinds of honesty, freedom from affectation, good faith. The metaphor that springs to mind is nakedness that accepts its shame without imposing it on the audience, but the nakedness is neither physical nor individual. Genuine theatrical achievement makes us emperors conscious in laughter or tears that our new clothes do not amount to much.

I am not sure the terms translate the experience. There is a quality that emerges when other aspects of a stage presentation are precisely right and imparts an electric fascination to a performance. It is rare. It is independent of the prestige and experience of the actors. I have seen it in a pokey rehearsal space at the Victorian College of the Arts and in a disused factory in a slum near the Gare de Lyons, as well as once or twice in famous theatres occupied by companies with international reputations.

Not very convincing, I'm afraid, but that is why I do not feel, as Noel seems to, that genuine theatrical achievement depends on banishing the cult of the classic and its falsehoods. I cannot imagine that elusive candor ever becoming universal, or ever quite dying out while theatres exist.

Dennis Douglas, formerly of Monash University, is presently living near Oxford where he pursues his many roles as a freelance drama producer, writer, poet and critic.

A FLOWERING BUSH

In the flowering bush the zebra finch
moves in small explosions of blossom
it looks into the face at the end of each
branch then goes whirling in
In the dream the bush grew a thousand
leaves that were silver-eyes
until the zebra finch went darting in

In the wind is the memory of every bush
that ever flowered in all dreams
that have not come true
So the tiny finches fly through branches
in our dream-trees out of the wind

ROBERT ADAMSON

THE CIRCUS STRONG-MAN OF 1931

I was the circus strong-man in 1931,
He said, and now I'm their last clown.

Outside, the sky grew darker as the sun
Went down, and the old man muttered
His story as the cinema crowd came out:

Yes, I was the circus strong-man, could
Have built the harbour-bridge single-handed
In those days, strong as a bushman's armpit
I was, tough as petrified wood.

He paused to gaze and then to spit,
Muttering with his story as the crowd came out:

So you're seeing this here film? Jean Harlow, now
That was a woman, blonde as the moon,
An angel straight from hell, pretty as a saloon.
They're all dead now, of course, and gone
Too soon. I won't be long meself.
Can't stay for the movie, you see, have to
Go to church instead.

He laughed, but after a while he said:

Yes, have to go to church instead, me missus
Plays the organ and I hunt down the mice.
The singing is grand, too, really quite nice.
And in the day I clean the grounds,
Sometimes take the money for the matinee —
The circus, that is, not the ruddy church.
But back in those old days I really lived,
Was tough, the circus strong-man, and now
I'm paid to laugh. But behind the laugh I'm
All frown, a sombre man, and know what I know:
I don't work over-time. I'll be
Seeing you, now I've got to go.

His life-story was just begun or finished,
And the crowd at last was out.

SHANE McCAULEY

THREE POEMS BY RICHARD TIPPING

PELICANS

space is curving in with time
towards the light.

earth is everywhere
seeming to eat us

like the city eats the river
brings the local into view

pelicans on a weekend off

FAR

hot snaps
pit stop
flash
hot cats
head over heels
the x-rated poem
a zebra kissing
mutual theft
blowing steam, lust and electricity
lips teeth tongue breath
we are we are we are we are we are
imagination's navigators
stars and eyes
shall i compare thee to a summer's day without
blowflies?
listen to the moon
c.r.a.c.k.l.e.

HEADING NORTH
(for Maisie)

i love you more than a tree full of frogs or
a bursting creek, because you hear loud ants
the scrape of shaving and the sea making love with
rocks.

you leave rainforests where you walk —
parrots and pythons, intricate orchids
dripping from your freckled shoulders like embroidered
gowns.

you don't stop when it stops. i'm axle to your wheel.
careering magpies, mottled doves, quick flapping away
from the first car for hours

AFTERWARDS

There is always the morning after
when the heart a gallstone
rubs against the belly's lining
a roomfull of ash
cans books & butts piled up
the fire brigades moaning
through Darlinghurst
Sydney's burning this tragic city
where I came to find you.

Who is this stranger?
Look at me he says
Inhabit my pain
How do you know what I think of
when I'm alone?
the nights & days
how do any of us know
we live in the lions' park
there is no love in our country
but I can never look at you again
in firelight or moonlight
distributing praise & blame
I see the skin on my arms creping
the wife drivelling
the husband upstairs in bed.

I was your Muse your absurd Juliet
you were my love my crippled Romeo
when we kissed the room trembled
you made your choice
I went & fought for life
to live is difficult
to die is quick & over
I've heard you in the streets
howling for both of us
stood on the landing silent
as over the rooftops
the lynx-faced stray
comes meeowing for comfort.

DOROTHY HEWETT

THE WANDERER

frail
as if
after a long flight
over mountains & deserts

soft
ly dropping
onto twig

light as a blue wren's foot
it settles

sending
as a wren did
seconds earlier

the insects scuttling

to that most ancient shelter:
a hut made of bark
beneath a roof of trees:

so comes rain
to a lodge of leaves.

J. S. HARRY

POODLE DIPLOMACY

innocently entering
malcolm fraser's
temporary garden
through the black
wrought-iron
security-gate
that is opened
to let in
to 'his' lodge
an immaculately-groomed
shampoo-scented
visiting rolls-royce car,
the
small
white
french
(republican's)
poodle
curtsies deep
to the (australian)
(royalist's)
ground
it is peeing upon
as if
to illustrate
with the purest
of pee
in the absence
of ideals
policies
'truth'
or wit —
a politics of expedience
with a dog's habit
of following its nose.

J. S. HARRY

THE ROSE GARDEN

Thai society holidays
say a password
through the intercom
the ornate gate
where rotarians
paddle on a lake

First thing you notice
too much fertiliser

Teak lined room
imported 555 filters
and a millionaire
plus wife, two daughters

A monkey god
doing all the talking
cheery but haggard
proud

of rose colored virgins
holding ambition by the hand
of little brothers

ADAM AITKEN

NANCY KEESING

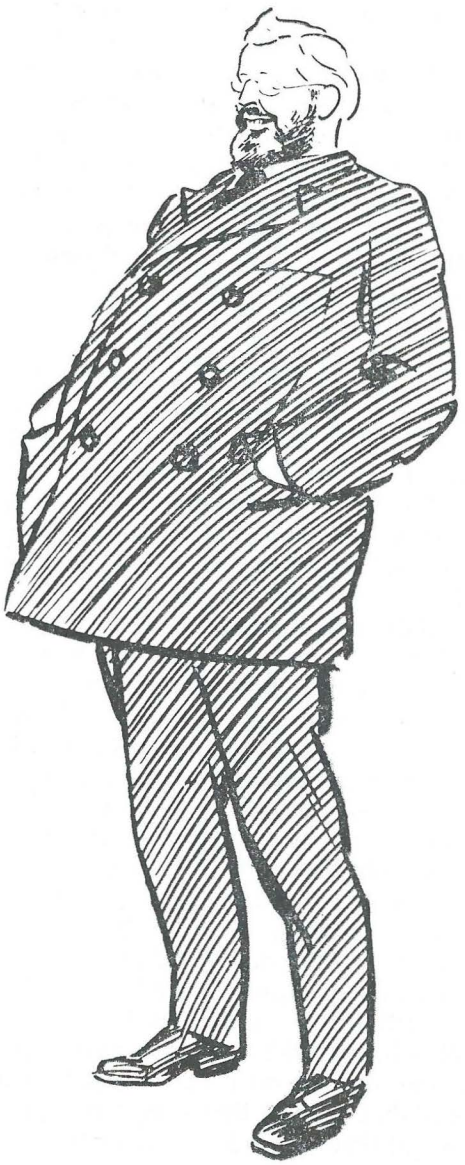
Remembering Robertson

and a unique occasion

In 1970 the "old" regime at Angus and Robertson was taken over by the "new order" of Gordon Barton. For some months there was an interregnum when Australia's premier publishing firm more or less continued under its existing momentum but without a publisher at all until Richard Walsh was appointed. Many people wondered how "young Richie" would go and some of his early decisions caused considerable concern—even outrage. Many old-established staff resigned.

Undoubtedly the new marriage was difficult for a time, and many writers and others who could see wrongs and rights on both sides agonised about divided loyalties. For my part it became perfectly feasible and sensible to value and work with "young Richie" Walsh and his team while admiring them in many ways and thinking them less than admirable in others — what writer, over a long association with any publisher, ever and always saw completely eye to eye? At the same time I retained friendships and contacts with George Ferguson and friends and ex A & R editors such as Douglas Stewart, Beatrice Davis and Tony Barker who were now working otherwise and elsewhere. All the same one often tiptoed over eggshells, watched one's words, bit one's tongue.

Then . . . on the Sunday afternoon of 7th November 1982 the splendid book *Dear Robertson/Letters to an Australian Publisher* by A. W. (Tony) Barker was launched.* Barker was an editor who left Angus and Robertson in 1973. It really seemed as if the magnetism of the firm's founder continued and prevailed and could heal all wounds in A & R's present day basement shop in Pitt Street, almost directly beneath the historic vanished Castlereagh Street shop and offices. I wondered whether any occasion, any person,



*A. W. Barker, ed.: *Dear Robertson; Letters to an Australian Publisher* (Angus and Robertson, $19.95).

other than this book launching and George Robertson himself, could have drawn together for a most cordial gathering, so many lions and so many lambs, though which animal was which that day it was impossible to tell.

George Ferguson gave the address. He is a grandson of George Robertson whose daughter Bessie married John A. (later Sir John) Ferguson. George Ferguson was one of the firm's most distinguished publishers, a notable historian of Australian publishing and a past president of the Australian Book Publishers Association. Listening to him were Richard Walsh, no longer "young Richie" but a publisher of proven flair and ability and Barry Watts, manager of the shop. Erstwhile Angus & Robertson editors and employees were there — Douglas Stewart, Beatrice Davis, Shirley Malcolm and Elizabeth Hughes. Geoff Neeve, perhaps the firm's longest serving employee was a listener and there were many writers, among them Marjorie Barnard, Ronald McKie, Robert D. FitzGerald, Olaf Ruhen, Rabbi R. Brasch, Alma Timms (widow of E. V. Timms and an author in her own right), Gavin Souter, Pixie O'Harris and Nancy Phelan. Many of these people and their husbands, wives and friends must, as I did, have marvelled at Time's healing powers.

Three generations of Fergusons were there: George and Joyce; John and Virginia and John's son Anthony. Two granddaughters of George Robertson, Joyce Pamm and Nancy Williams, children of his son Douglas who for some time worked for the firm, were present too.

The book-launch pest who seems inevitable on nearly all such occasions spoke loud but slurred to a hapless young journalist all through the main speech while his embarrassed wife, and who shall blame her, tried to look as if she didn't know him. Some of the book-browsing or buying public were there, shopping on Sunday which may or may not have pleased the original George. I pondered whether one apparently enthralled small boy might look back on 7th November and George Ferguson's words as a day that changed his life. Angus & Robertson staff had catered generously and were an obvious team of good hosts.

Meanwhile George Ferguson in an excellent address had said many excellent things — I'm grateful to Barry Watts for lending me George's notes to refresh my memory as I write this, but why, oh why, in 1982, did not someone think to record this historic occasion on tape? Ferguson explained that, from earliest times, George Robertson ensured that Angus & Robertson kept all letters to and from authors; this led him to a tribute to the Mitchell Library which holds a huge archive of those letters. He outlined Robertson's part in steering David Scott Mitchell towards collecting Australiana. He admired, as any reader of the book will admire, Tony Barker's skill in selection, explanation, and linking narrative. He wondered whether letter writing may be a doomed art in this age of telephone, telexes, etc. He told some splendid anecdotes about his grandfather — of his pride in his Highland Scottish descent though he was born at Halstead in Essex. Someone once referred to Robertson as "this big, bearded Englishman" and prompted the infuriated Scot to ask "would a man be a horse if he was born in a horse trough?" He outlined, as does the book, the early history of the firm. He thanked Walsh for publishing the letters, Barker for so skilfully crafting the book and the Literature Board for a grant to Barker that made possible the long task of research. He reminisced a little about his youthful training in publishing and towards the end of his speech said, "The real value of this book is as an interesting personal, but accurate, account of early Australian publishing."

Certainly you can't beat original documents, (and tape recorders in 1982, forsooth), for accuracy. By chance while I was reading *Dear Robertson* I also read Jack Lindsay's *Life Rarely Tells* and it provided a perfect illustration of the superiority of record over fallible memory. In 1918 Jack Lindsay, aged seventeen, was visiting Sydney from Brisbane where he still lived, attended the University of Queensland, and often thought of his famous father, Norman, whom he had not seen since he was a small boy. On that visit he met the eminent, if dull, editor Bertram Stevens. Jack Lindsay describes his pleasure when, after he returned to Brisbane "George Robertson, the publisher, at B.S.'s hint, sent me a copy of Norman Lindsay's collected pen and inks". The much more interesting, and moving, real story is in *Dear Robertson*. Lindsay, giving the address of his maternal uncle Dr Elkington, wrote in a letter received on 11th April 1918:

DEAR SIRS,

I venture with much diffidence to ask a favour, which, if you can see your way to granting, will give me more pleasure than I can express.

I would like a presentation copy of The Pen Drawings of Norman Lindsay, *which is just on the eve of being published. As I am Norman Lindsay's eldest son, my wish to possess the book needs no amplification; and*

as a first year's student at the university here, my pocket money is limited. My scholarship allowance barely covers the necessary books for my course.

If you could see your way, sirs, to grant my rather audacious request, you will make me very grateful.

I REMAIN, DEAR SIRS,
YOURS VERY TRULY,
Jack Lindsay.

Robertson sent young Lindsay the pen drawing book (letter after letter testified to his generosity with books, financial aid to people in real distress, constructively good and kind deeds). He also, after a grateful letter from Jack Lindsay sent him Leon Gellert's *Songs of a Campaign* illustrated by Norman "and threw in *The Magic Pudding* for good measure". One of the values of the book is its splendid illustrations—the Jack Lindsay episode has a portrait photograph of Jack (at 17) and three other Universtiy of Queensland undergraduates capped and gowned, which Jack had sent to Robertson "as my relatives insist that you should see the boy you have been so good to".

The letter writers are a roll-call of women and men who shaped Australian literature from the 1890s to the 1930s. The only way to savour the book, as George Ferguson advised us, is to "get yourself a copy and enjoy it". However I do want to point out here that fascinating as the personal histories and interchanges are, the book records all kinds of matters of great interest, for instance Robertson's long, and not fully successful attempts to have amended the US Copyright Laws, (once Dickens' bugbear) that were so inequitable to other countries. Apparently one reason for American intransigence was that a particularly obnoxious segment of these laws was insisted on by the powerful printers' union. In fact, as Barker explains, it would be 1969 before "Australian-produced books by Australian authors could be imported into the United States in unlimited quantities without loss of copyright".

I can only share some of my feelings about a unique occasion as best I can — everyone can and should share this unique book.

Nancy Keesing's most recent book Lily on the Dustbin; Slang of Australian Women and Families *(Penguin Books, $5.95) sold out and is reprinting. Miss Keesing is working on a sequel.*

HERMETICS

Still cooling
in jars
on my window
sill
is the ruby-
red
serene
of an Italian
man
picking plums.

FAYE DAVIS

BACK IN BUSINESS

Back in business, in tycoon form
Touting like a hustler for what
The day may bring: bring noise bring
Heat bring dust and it smells
Like the street (my private property my
Wall Street, my bonanza)
Bought and sold, selling now
On competitive terms: my sharp
My shop-worn challenge
On a day like today, on my street
Feeling strong: feel cunning (lazy malice)
And sly; feel like laughing —
Wanna rip somebody off.

ELLY McDONALD

ELIZABETH RIDDELL

Remembering Maie Casey

The Lady Casey best known for her public life as wife of a Governor-General and leading politician wrote books on art and architecture and poetry and was an energetic supporter of many artists. She died recently at her propety, Edrington, near Melbourne.

I came to Maie Casey late. A few years ago when I was working on *The Australian* somebody (not on the paper) suggested I ask her for an interview. I wrote to her, and she responded with an invitation to lunch at the East Melbourne house where she then spent part of the week. I flew to Melbourne from Sydney for the day. It was a Friday.

In all the years I had been a busy journalist in and out of Australia, and the Caseys had been a central couple in politics and society at home and abroad, I had met neither of them although I had listened in the Press Gallery in Parliament House to Richard Casey arguing for or against one issue or the other. Whatever I knew about them, especially about Maie, was superficial.

In my experience real friendship seldom develops from such journalistic occasions as this lunch. The interviewer and the interviewed are as a rule content to meet and part without further commitment. Not this time. Maie and I became friends, sympathetic to one another, seldom meeting face to face but often by letter and on the telephone. In the last few months of her life I would pick up the receiver in Sydney and hear with a kind of painful pleasure a voice that was losing its resonance. It became breathless and muffled, the sound of a bird leaving a pond, and then was heard no more.

On our first meeting I was immensely taken with her — her small, compact figure in a navy blue dress, no jewellery, carefully brushed white hair, deft hands, unpretentious good manners, soft decisive speech. We ate half an avocado each, an omelette cooked at the table, water biscuits and cream cheese on which she suggestel I sprinkle some sugar "as the French do". (There were other lunches with the same food and identical comments.) Towards the end of our talk that day I suggested that had she not married into "politics and public service" she might have achieved professionalism in painting or writing or both — she came nearest to it in *An Australian Story* — and she seemed quite taken aback. "I was more use as Richard's wife," she said, and then went on to make a case for the amateur in art that did not convince me. I took the subject up with her again later and got nowhere. She was a true amateur, (generously ready also to support a creative artist in whom she believed), prepared to publish her own work at her own expense and donate the proceeds to one cause or another. She filled the role of a patron of the arts without exacting the acknowledgment demanded by mining and cigarette companies.

That first luncheon ended in a little tour of some of the precious objects in the East Melbourne house and a visit to her walk-in wardrobe where she pressed upon me a pair of silk knickers printed in the pattern of leopard spots and a pair of gloves, both bought years ago at Hattie Carnegie's couturier New York house. The wardrobe was full of timeless dresses with memorable labels, worn on many splendid occasions. Somewhere there was a boxful of medallions, jewelled symbols of awards offered by many countries for various good works. Her favourite, she said, treasured because of its beautiful design, was the Gold Kaiser-I-Hind from the Indian government.

Before I left to return to Sydney Richard Casey came in for a cup of tea — limping from a bad accident, deaf, cheerful, handsome — and to pick up a bag before driving himself in some fast, glamorous car to Edrington where she would join

him later, driving herself in another fast, glamorous car.

I found that Maie's background conditioned her to be interested in, to admire, to like, many famous people she met in the course of politics and diplomacy. When she wrote about them, especially in monographs produced later in her life, the writing was affectionate but concealing, almost defensive, as if she would see anything more intimate as a kind of betrayal. Secrets were hinted at but quickly passed over. "Why don't you write that, Maie?" I would ask. "After all, you're the only one who can." "Oh, I could never do that," she would reply. Such discretion does not lead to sparkling reminiscences.

Once I stayed with her at Edrington, the big house buried in the trees at Berwick. It rained without ceasing, the sky dripping on the trees that dripped on the lawn and the roses. Conversation was all of the past. She did not want to know much about the present unless that present included someone from the past.

Unless Maie threw everything away there must be a mass of papers, and somebody who knew her far better than I did could collect, from them and other sources, material for a fascinating political-social-literary biography containing the information and opinion that she chose not to disclose while she was alive. But I am afraid the biographer would be risking Maie's disapproval.

Elizabeth Riddell, freelance journalist and former literary editor of The Australian, *is a poet. She lives in Sydney.*

LIQUIDAMBERS

(i)
how a raindrop gives
— to a leaf —
movement (jabs) & how
the eye is drawn, humorous
& shrewd,
to the water bead,

its brightness, and
enclosure in, and bright breaking from
a water bead,
and how
the leaf springs

back — there is a springing back
in the leaves, halved
and the halfs halved & lost
in leaves.

how leaves do,
whole afternoons,
fill windows.

(ii)
how frost burns
(leaves)
burns leaves & how

the eye
winces
at

this furious, slow
burning — as if at smoke,
as if of leaves burning.

how leaves do burn — one &
one
& one

like ordinary pages
& how the wind

pokes at this burning

like an old gardener
half blind in the smoke,
half numb from the heat.

(iii)
it greens within the eyes/it kindles
against the eyes. Its skin-thin wrinkling
is blemishes in foil, is water
reflected. Rub the eyes
— these fabulous lamps — see the changing
colors re-flare.

—watching the rain; watching the scurries
of drops blow in — luminous —
to their shadow. Watching
the kinds of rain flurry happen — the particular
drop-scatter, happening —

(iv)
how branches give — how the eye gives
(watching the tree break the storm)
giving back
on a quiet day
a storm of branches
to the tree,
how a branch does (branch). how
seasons do (storms in windows)
storm in a window.

DANE THWAITES

GRAEME TURNER

Our "Dubious Legacy"

Nationalism and Contemporary Australian Film

In *Australian Liberalism and National Character,* Tim Rowse adapts a Raymond Williams aphorism to local use by maintaining that there "are in fact no Australians. There are only ways of seeing people as Australians".[1] His study reveals just how malleable these "ways of seeing people as Australians" are; radical myths of national identity have been consistently appropriated by conservative ideologies in order to cloak divisions within the structure of Australian society. Richard White supports Rowse's thesis in *Inventing Australia* when he insists that there is no "real" Australian waiting to be uncovered: "a national identity," he says, "is an invention."[2] This seems uncontestable; however, it is worth remembering that the "ways of seeing" a national identity are not simply cultural templates to be employed, with automatic success, by various interest groups. Versions of national identity are never static or fixed, so the specific terms of the particular "invention" are not without their own cultural significance and influence.

The particularities of the 1890s version of nationalism have outlasted most of the political and social conditions which produced them, without losing their potential for carrying important cultural meanings or evoking myth. Indeed, the legend of the nineties is still the dominant nationalist myth, its centrality revealed by yet another maturing art form — the cinema — turning to the images and myths of an apparently anachronistic version of national identity as the appropriate mode through which to project nationalism.

The 1890s have an historical and mythic function in Australian life. In this period we locate the beginnings of our nationhood, and the paradigm of Australian nationalism — the Australian Legend.[3] This paradigm has been over-emphasised in accounts of our literary and popular traditions, and most contemporary urban Australians would feel we have outgrown its rural, pioneering and colonial associations. Yet, its pervasiveness as the dominant nationalist myth within the culture can be seen in a wide range of "texts" produced by that culture — from the aggressive nationalism of popular heroes such as Dennis Lillee, to the persistent mythologising of country life in preference to urban or suburban existence by the advertising trade. Given the current usefulness of the myth in supporting conservative political interests — note Malcolm Fraser's recent use of the myth of mateship while hawking the wages freeze — it is nevertheless clear that the 1890s brand of nationalism is still the preferred nationalistic mode. Not only did our literature announce its distinctiveness by appropriating this particular mode as a convention, but it seems as if other art forms — even those maturing at a much later date — must articulate their nationalism in the same terms.

Australian cinema seems to be at just such a point now; three major films, in particular — *Gallipoli, Breaker Morant* and *The Man From Snowy River* — demand to be seen as nationalist texts, the mode of their nationalism that of the nineties.

The victim of Hollywood's domination of the film industry, Australian cinema has been subject to long periods of almost total inactivity. While this has not affected the coherence of a developing tradition it has encouraged certain anomalous kinds of critical attitudes to Australian film. It is orthodox, for example, to look on the seventies as the "renaissance" of Australian cinema, imposing on the revival of film production in this country all the qualities and responsibilities of a mature cultural form. However, while film is unlike most other art forms in this country in that its development has not been continuous, it is subject to the same process of maturation: it must go through the stages of development from a

colonial or immigrant art form, into a nationalist art form, and only then to the kind of mature "national" art form it is so often assumed to be.[4] Much of the misleading and destructive criticism of film in this country emanates from a failure to see it as still within a developing tradition which has not reached the stage of maturity the novel, say, attained in the fifties.[5] Indeed, the three films I discuss provide evidence that our cinema is only now entering a nationalist phase: in *Breaker Morant* the surface of the film is "nationalistic to the point of jingoism"; *Gallipoli's* advertisers promise to make you "proud to be an Australian"; and Banjo Paterson's powerful celebration of the Australian virtues, "The Man From Snowy River", becomes, in Max Harris' phrase, the "logo" of the film.[6] The "Lawson-Furphy" brand of nationalism includes within it the strategy of measuring Australian cultural development against the standard of English culture, and "Australian nationalism by its departure from English values and loyalties";[7] the two war films, *Gallipoli* and *Breaker Morant*, make direct use of this strategy. It is their particular versions of nationalism I wish to discuss first.

In *Breaker Morant* the execution of Morant and Handcock is seen as a racist act; the features which define the characters as Australian (Morant is seen as Australian, despite his birthplace) are those which incite the British to destroy them. British and Australian values are directly contrasted through the most unequivocal of structures — the courtroom drama. The conventional roles of the innocent and the guilty, the convict and the gaoler, are neatly inverted so that the Australian convicts are seen as honest and courageous while their British persecutors are treacherous and cowardly. The simplicity of the equation reflects the moral simplicity of a film which sees murder as acceptable in war, and the British as simpleminded opportunists eager to thwart their colonial allies. The British in *Gallipoli* are equally stereotyped; monocled and parading on camels when they are not sending our boys into the battle zones to provide cover for their own troops. Peter Weir depicts the British in Egypt with the crude nationalism of a 1890s' *Bulletin* cartoon, and while this is not central to the film's purpose it is an important moment for its relationship with its audience because it proffers an invitation for them to indulge their preference for the Australians by finding the British ridiculous. The anti-British attitude modulates easily, as it does in our history, into a general suspicion of authority. In both films the paradigm of authority — bureaucratic force aligned against human vulnerability — is British. The Australian versions of authority tacitly tend to condone the larrikin, independent and undisciplined behaviour of the troops; the Breaker himself is an "acceptable" version of authority who participates in his troops' "unmilitary" but "pardonable" revenge on the Boers, while *Gallipoli's* Australian officers incite the riot that disrupts the mock battle in training. The avuncular Major Barton actually renounces his authority in the suicidal last attack; saying he will not ask his men to do anything he would not do himself, he dies with them. The only recommended authority, paradoxically, is an egalitarian one and Barton, again, establishes this as the Australian variety when he accedes to Archy's and Frank's request to be in the same unit simply because they are "mates".

The codes of mateship dominate the narrative structure in both films. In *Breaker* the bond between the Breaker and Handcock is the most obvious example of an automatic "me, too" mateship, but the discipline of the Breaker's unit is, in fact, based on a network of interdependencies, and an unquestioned, unspoken system of values and loyalties which is a clearly defined military equivalent of the bush ethos usually associated with the conventions of mateship. Although reviews tell us that *Gallipoli* is a "study" of mateship,[8] the treatment of its central relationship is conventional, not analytic. There is little sense of Archy's and Frank's relationship being anything other than paradigmatic; it could, unkindly, be summarised as boy meets boy, boys become mates: it is automatic. This is a weakness in *Gallipoli* because, as in *Breaker Morant*, the codes of mateship are not merely providing us with a sense of the period, they are expected to validate the structure of the central relationships. One of the effects of the literary convention of mateship — the negation of individuation or specificity of character so that the particular relationship is subsumed by the convention — is seen in *Gallipoli*; the current cliche of depicting youth and innocence by using blond actors (Whitton in *Breaker*, Walter in *1915*) is the major signifier of any differentiations between Archy and Frank. In resting its representation of relationships on the unquestioned assumption of the naturalness of the conventions of mateship, *Gallipoli* clearly accepts rather than "studies" those conventions.

Such limitations do not, of course, affect an audience one can expect to endorse the myth of mateship carried by the narrative; it is not surprising that both films met with great success in

Australia. *Gallipoli*, in particular, was greeted as "a masterpiece", a "film of true nobility and greatness".[9] *The National Times* provides us with a glimpse at the motives behind such an extravagant reaction: John Hindle applauded the choice of subject matter itself — "obviously, a splendid subject for a film".[10] The reviews, particularly in the upmarket press, were themselves revealing, and nationalist, cultural productions:

> "*Gallipoli* is the best film I've seen this year. The best film from anywhere. Nothing I have seen has moved me so much. Nothing has had the thematic virtue of *Gallipoli*."[11]

Clues to the "motivated" nature of the criticism lies in the cultural cringe of "the best film from anywhere", and if "thematic virtue" means anything it means that the subject alone is sufficient to elevate this film above others.

Where *Gallipoli* least deserves such encomiums, in fact, is where it reveals its discomfort with overtly nationalist intentions. If we compare *Gallipoli* with a film as "calculatedly mythmaking"[12] as Charles Chauvel's *Forty Thousand Horsemen*, it appears to be torn between the conventional aim of presenting a romantic articulation of the Anzac legend, and the more contemporary ambition of producing a very modern film which would be realistic and political enough, contextually, to "de-mythologise" Gallipoli. This split in intention can be seen in the very real sense of disjunction between the Australian section, in which a wry and detached treatment of the naive spirit of adventure which inspires Archy to enlist is placed in opposition to the camel-driver's sceptical rejection of the whole nationalist and imperialist ethic, and the scenes in Egypt.[13] While the Australian scenes give the narrative an ironic and critical point of view, the scenes in Egypt are so uncritical of the Australians, their motives and behaviour, that we are invited to see the film's viewpoint as one which unquestioningly endorses the legend of the digger and the myth of national initiation attached to Gallipoli. As in Chauvel's war films, any complicating development of character of context disappears as we are treated to a riot of nationalistic stereotypes: Australian troops are rough and ready, exuberant and brash tourists; they find the sophistication and order of the British troops ridiculous and lampoon them enthusiastically; while the British need discipline to maintain their troops, the Australians rely entirely on an innate national pride and the conventions of mateship to maintain theirs; the Australian troops at Gallipoli, and particularly the hero, Archy, need not have died if the English commanders had not blundered and then dithered; and so on. When the narrative is injected with life it is in scenes such as the argument in the Egyptian shop, but here the "boys will be boys" viewpoint of the troops' behaviour would not be out of place in *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*.

Structurally, the film is romance; its heroes are seen simply as that, and are at the mercy of the most elementary social and ethical determinants — Archy is from the bush, Frank is from the city. As representatives of Australian youth going to war they are given no detailed social context but exist in limbo — heroes in waiting — ready to be the symbolic indices of the futility and waste of Gallipoli. Visually, the film's great bursts of light lovingly mythologise the empty landscape of Australia and the tanned physiques of Australians. Romance, too, seems the appropriate mode for a film in which the system of values is so unexamined, and the resolution of the narrative so dependent on convention — but the film clearly wants to resist this by tempering its rendition of the myth with sufficient irony and realism to encourage the reviewers, at least, to talk about it in terms of its being an "artistic statement".

Unlike *Breaker Morant*, then, *Gallipoli* seems to be a film that is uncomfortable with its nationalism — perhaps wondering if such an approach is a kind of cultural recidivism. This sort of scruple is a common one in the Australian film culture — the critics, too, have an ambivalent relationship with nationalist film. Tim Burstall has pointed out how narrow our critics' view of Australian-ness is — insisting upon certain kinds of Australian authenticity and then vilifying filmmakers for preferring the modes connected with just those kinds of authenticity.[14] Certainly, one approaches the criticism of *The Man From Snowy River* — a film that is anything but uncomfortable with its nationalism — with some circumspection as the same critics whose nationalist preferences infected their response to Gallipoli adjudge Snowy River to be a "tragedy: a costly, awful mess":

> Using "clues" from the poem, the scriptwriters, John Dixon and Cul Cullen, have cobbled together a tenuous, puffed-out soap-operatic story about love and hate in the high country. I don't know what their brief demanded, but the evidence of the film suggests that the story was written to accommodate a number of commercial considerations — indeed that the script itself was little more than the realisation of a marketing plan.[15]

Clearly, this harrumphs, *Snowy River* presents the unacceptable face of nationalism. The key words are "commercial", "marketing" and "plan"; the reviewer plainly suspects the film's producers of having set out to make money. For reasons which lie beyond the range of this discussion — but which have to do with the nature of our film culture, and the ways in which the highbrow discomfort with popular art is expressed through the appropriation of certain kinds of cinema as high art — the critical reception for this film in the highbrow press was markedly hostile.[16]

Generally, *The Man From Snowy River* is seen by the critics as a "sellout" to Hollywood rather than as a nationalistic film. It is unashamedly populist, its thematic preoccupations carefully buried beneath the action; it selected an American to play an American in an Australian film; and stylistically it flies in the face of all the critical preferences current in the Australian film culture. *The Man From Snowy River* is all plot, it seems, developing at breakneck pace and with ruthless economy in a style more reminiscent of the golden years of Hollywood than the "Australian renaissance". Unlike *Gallipoli*, it is enthusiastically romantic; and romance is rarely found in any of our narrative traditions — with the significant exception of the ballads of Paterson and Gordon. The film appears to be trying to use the specific terms of Australian myths and legends to set up an alternative tradition of frontier romance, an Australian genre that is different in meaning to the Western. This meaning, while not adding up to anything like a "great artistic statement", makes *The Man From Snowy River* a vividly nationalist film.

Unlike *Gallipoli* or *Breaker Morant*, the version of Australian identity articulated in *Snowy River* is not dependent upon a comparison with Britain; apparently the makers were confident enough of their "marketing plan" to concentrate on the Australian's relationship with his own land. That confidence is clearly evident in the visuals; the camera is exuberantly active, swooping and soaring among the mountain scenery in a celebration of the landscape that is brash and naive. The harshness and indomitability of the landscape, so clearly caught by Russell Boyd's blinding vistas of reflected light in *Gallipoli*, is here presented simply by the scale of the landscape — the screen is packed with busy horizons, shot from cranes and helicopters. The result is a vision of a land that is awesome but not unimaginable, inspiring affection and imparting a qualified optimism that fits the romantic form.

Although the film carries within it the same keynotes of mateship, egalitarianism, and the bush ethos we find in Paterson's poem, it is in the depiction of the relationship with the land that it is most faithful to the poem and most nationalistic. The land is tough, dangerous and beautiful. Jessica sees this when she is trapped on the cliff in the storm: "It changes so fast," she says, "one minute it's Paradise, the next it's trying to kill you." Accommodation within this murderous Paradise is the goal the hero, Jim Craig, pursues. His acceptance of the challenge the landscape presents differentiates him from the squatters in the valley below, while his affinity with the bush horses invests his quest with hope by connecting him with the film's strongest metaphor for the spirit of the land. Jim and Jessica meet through his demonstration of his familiarity with horses — teaching her a rope trick that the villainous station horse breaker, Curly, spends the rest of the film trying to master — and he reaches what the film defines as manhood by matching the bush horses on their own terrain. His respect for the "colt from Old Regret" is the clearest example of his harmony with the Australian version of Nature, and it is important that he trains the horse by "gentling" it rather than by imposing himself upon it.

This is the thematic substance of the film, and it is central to the nationalist myth and the ideology of the invented Australian: ours is not, like the American, a myth of the imposition of the individual upon the land — the politics of conquest; ours is a myth of accommodation and acceptance which admits the impossibility of conquering the land and merely recommends a manner of survival by learning to live in partnership with it. In what it means to be "a man" in *The Man From Snowy River*, we have the reverse of the individualistic ethic of the western; in this country the "man" is not the toughest one, but the one who can accept, and live with, the priorities of the land. Jim's success is rewarded with the love of Jessica — whose background typifies the range of alternatives Jim rejects: the values and ways of the city, and an exploitative attitude to the land. Jessica, too, rejects these — she is anything but the archetypal civilising female. Through their union the film offers us a conventional romantic resolution, but also a paradigm of existence in harmony with the land which is of a piece with the nostalgic sense of acceptance underlying Paterson's poem.

This is not to suggest enormous subtlety of execution, or that the work offers us, in any sense, "truths" about ourselves or Australia. Rather, the film's populist intentions allow it to employ the

terms of the nationalist myth as the stuff of legend and romance. The romantic style of the film acknowledges its relation to reality, playing down the main characters while endowing with mythic proportions the world within which the action takes place.

While *The Man From Snowy River* acknowledges its mythic sources more ingenuously than either *Breaker Morant* or *Gallipoli*, all three films refer to the myths derived from the nineties as the preferred mode through which to project a nationalist vision. All three films appear to do so advisedly, to denote a nationalist interest. This suggests that the function of the myth is *not* to reveal the "true" Australian or the "real" Australia, but to stand at one remove from this; the durability of these myths and this mode suggests that their cultural function is not to define Australia but to signify nationalism in Australia. The pervasiveness of this function, and its persistent manipulation by a wide variety of social and political interests, must be explained in these terms.

This is not generally accepted. In his latest book, Professor Wilkes complains about the unquestioned dominance of this mode of nationalism, "other significant manifestations" of it having been "overlooked".[17] We hear echoes of H. P. Heseltine, twenty years earlier, insisting that the myths embodied in Lawson's work were anachronistic: "if all Lawson and his tribe can offer is mateship and proletarian protest," wrote Heseltine, "they must regretfully, even painfully, be relegated to the past."[18] Judith Wright, while dismissing Paterson's ballads as "colloquial heroics", regrets the currency of the myth his poems, among others, have created. Sounding like the reviewers of the film, she grudgingly accepts that the versions of heroism depicted in Paterson's poems have "built themselves slyly into our characters", but this is a "dubious legacy" which may take us "another century to outgrow".[19]

Just as our contemporary film critics prefer the nationalism of *Gallipoli* because it clearly has artistic pretensions, to *Snowy River* which does not, Wright, Wilkes and Heseltine imply that there is other, better, art available upon which we might build our national ideologies. Apart from implying we can *choose* such things (as we can, apparently, choose those works which form our literary tradition), this position assumes one can fix a nexus between literary quality and cultural impact; what is seen as the meretriciousness of Paterson's poetry disqualifies it as an important reference to a central body of myth in our culture, and invalidates that body of myth.

Reaction against the cultural force of the myths of the nineties, and against more contemporary descendants, such as ockerism, seems to be motivated in part by this notion that popular art should not be part of our cultural capital. Further, our cultural myths are seen in the most literal, pre-Barthesian sense; that is, they can be "disproved". Behind Wilkes' often admirable and useful re-reading of Australia's "cultural development", and behind Heseltine's admittedly seminal correction of orthodox accounts of our literary tradition, is the sense that the "Lawson-Furphy tradition", or the "democratic theme" dominate our perception of our nationalist period by some kind of mistake. The received idea is wrong, so let us correct the received idea. What Heseltine saw as a distorted version of Australian writing, Wilkes sees as an historically incomplete version of Australian cultural development. Underlying Wilkes' approach is the assumption that the myth of the bushman, for instance, is available to empirical quantification and historical validation. Yet, history suggests the Australian of the nineties was no more the "Australian" mythologised by the nationalism of the nineties than we are now. As Crawford points out, the myth of the bushman was as much an urban invention as a rural fact; that is, it was never in the objective sense, true.[20]

The view that a certain mythic pattern cannot be accepted, or that one need only undermine its assumed historical basis in order to eradicate it, is a view that presents too simple a version of the way culture mythologises. Our nationalism is not created by history simply providing the social conditions from which certain modes of behaviour can be deduced; rather, the culture is formed by history in ways that deposit the substance for the articulation of national ideologies, some of which in turn are mythologised in the specific terms of the legend. The dominant version of Australian nationalism some hope to "outgrow" is not dominant because most Australians "lived" it, but because it fits Australians' ways of seeing themselves and their country — it derives from the ideology of being an Australian. It is more clearly seen, and therefore examined, in narrative art, which constructs a "world" as well as details recognisable social reality, because such art is able to provide insight into the workings of society that are more immediate, if less objective, than empiricism, and more articulate and coherent than those available to us in our daily living.[21] In film, as in literature, the patterns are clearly there; and the

congruence between the patterns of myth and meaning in the writing of the 1890s and in contemporary cinema suggest that those patterns are part of our culture's way of seeing itself as distinctive, part of the nationalist myth and ideology of the Australian.

Notes:

1. (Kibble, Melbourne, 1978), p. 257.
2. (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1981), p. viii.
3. I use the title of Russell Ward's book (O.U.P., Melbourne, 1958) as representative of the complex of images and conventions customarily seen as distinctively Australian. Clustering around Lawson and Furphy, they emerge from the "bush ethos" and are definitively secular, egalitarian and nationalist.
4. This is a paraphrase of the process described by H. P. Heseltine in "The Australian Image: The Literary Heritage", in Clement Semmler (ed.) *Twentieth Century Australian Literary Criticism* (O.U.P., Melbourne, 1967), pp. 87-88.
5. "Travel Books in Disguise: The Australian Novel and the Australian Film", *Overland*, No. 79 (April, 1980), pp. 19-24.
6. Jack Clancy, "Breaker Morant", *Cinema Papers*, No. 28 (August-September, 1981), p. 283; Max Harris, "Banjo Would Have Hated It", Weekend Australian Magazine (March 27, 1982), p. 7.
7. Wilkes, *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn*, p. 2.
8. Evan Williams, "Gallipoli Grandeur", *Weekend Australian*, August 8-9, 1981), p. 11.
9. ibid.
10. "Best of the Year", *The National Times* (August 16-22, 1981), p. 33.
11. ibid.
12. Scott Murray (ed.) *The New Australian Cinema* (Nelson, Melbourne, 198), p. 24.
13. This disjunction has been noticed in more positive accounts than mine; see Brian McFarlane's review in *Cinema Papers*, No. 33 (July-August, 1981), pp. 285-286.
14. "Triumph and Disaster for Australian Films", *The Bulletin* (24 September, 1977), pp. 45-55.
15. John Hindle, "Galloping Soapie in the High Country", *The National Times* (March 28-April 3, 1982), p. 40.
16. Those sections of the press more comfortable with popular art *Cinema Papers* (No. 38, p. 261-2) and *Rolling Stone* (No. 352, pp. 63-4) — were more impressed, and the public saw it in even greater numbers than *Star Wars*.
17. op.cit., p. 2.
18. op.cit., p. 87.
19. *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (O.U.P., Melbourne, 1966), p. 82.
20. R. M. Crawford, "The Birth of a Culture" in Chris Wallace-Crabbe (ed.) *The Australian Nationalists*, (O.U.P., Melbourne, 1971), pp. 34-35.
21. Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (Verso, London, 1978), p. 101.

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STONES

Peremptory silences
hunched smooth
they wait in dark places.

SHELTON LEA

OCCASIONS OF BIRDS

I.

I heard on the radio how birds in Assam
lifted like a cloud over the camellia forest
and flew to a village in the last light.
There it was warm and filled with other wings
transparent and flickering.
They dashed their bodies against the smoking lamps
and fell
into the street
on to the trodden stems of water hyacinth.

Women who had been picking tea
all day on the hillside
came down to the village
holding their baskets against their muslin skirts
and their skirts away from the bleeding feathers
in fear and surprise. There was hardly a sound
when the wings ceased to beat.

It was south of the Kahsi hills where the Brahmaputra
flows
the birds flowed to their death in the soft night.

II.

In Dar Es Salaam the morning lay on us like wet silk.
We bought fruit in thin slices, and yellow bead rings,
waiting for the news of the tornado, the hurricane,
the cyclone, the typhoon
crouched in the opaque sky.

We ran before the wind
to Malagasy, to Reunion, to Mauritius
where it caught us, cast us on the beach
beside the tourist cabins and the sugar cane,
both with rats.

Port Louis was under water, we saw with dismay.
The corpses of duck dinners
floated in the dark gutter under the blind windows
and past closed schools.

Reflected in this aberrant lake, old cool houses
suitable for provincial nobles and for slaves
brooded under wisteria. Their columns were erected
in memory of the Loire.

I remembered about the pink pigeons of Mauritius.
They have tiny heads and supplicating voices,
poor flakes of pink driven out when the forest was
felled
to make way for the chateaux.
There is not one left to complain.

III.

Governor Hunter despatched
many a live bird to England
to bleach in the fog, attempt a trill
in Hove or Lockerbie
and marvel through the bars
at rain on the pale honeyed flowers
and honeyeaters dancing on the rain.

As Governor Hunter and his men marched west
the sun struck gold from epaulettes
and sparkled on the cages ready for the feather,
the bright eye, the tender claw, the beak
of the lyrebird and the cockatoo
(the rosy one, the sulphur-crested screamer, the shining
black)
and the paradise parrot of which Leach says
"it is an exquisite creature,
in general green below and blue above"
(like forest, like sky)
"with red shoulders"
(at sunset out-sparkling the governor's gold)
"and a red forehead. It nests in sandhills."

One hundred and eighty years later
a man is out there in the dunes
searching for the paradise parrot.
Listen as he walks, crab-scuttle on the sand.
He has not much to offer this bird
which saw the gold and heard the sound of fife and
drum.

IV.

We were in a foreign country
reading about another foreign country —
well, hardly foreign at all
since once we saw it from a deck,
a smudge of cloud on cloud,
Mangere Island in the lonely Chathams
twelve thousand miles away in the long fall
of grey seas — reading about its five black robins
last of their race,
news because they were about to die.
As with a few Indians along the Amazon,
robins and Indians, it's all news.
small items only because so far away,
and small.

Rain sluiced the colonnades
where they sell the International Herald Tribune
(how to rent a palazzo, share a car to Munich, learn
Chinese)
with baseball scores from home.
Rare robins, the item said,
rare black robins, three females and two males,
the usual ratio, we're used to it.

It's cold on Mangere. The waves swing in across the
rocks
great shawls of kelp.
Three men were on Mangere
with tents and playing cards and paperbacks,
a radio, tins of butter, binoculars
to watch the robins, and suddenly spied
after fifteen years the orange-breasted parakeet
risen again, a flame rekindled from the phoenix fire.
What next? The black stilt or the kakapo?
The parrot like an owl that walks, stately, instead of
flying?
We doubt if they'll turn up.

The birds will be reprogrammed. Not much to do
with chirping, building nests or catching flies
or even flying. It's cold on Mangere
for orange-breasted parakeets and such.

ELIZABETH RIDDELL

LARRY BUTTROSE

Time in Sweden

From a forthcoming novel

Neither of us really wanted to return, but we were *staying* with Karin for the weekend, and so had little choice. Anyway, things were formal enough, without any further strain. We walked back, a little faster now, each of us in our own thoughts.

How little one can know, I was thinking, about that area behind another's black pupils. No matter how hard you look, there's no way to see. No wonder all those religions were promising Light — it's light to see within that inner area. Not outside, or into space, but within there. Behind those pupils. But we don't get to see in, and we live and we die knowing only another person's social process. We die without knowing, anyone.

A few more people were outside their summer houses now, eating lunch on the lawns. Most of them wore gardening clothes of some description, new, and well-fitting. They seemed to take their gardening very seriously, grim smiles, power tools in their hands.

"Most of them are watching television", said Elizabeth, following my eyes.

"That's what I thought before, on the way out. It's funny, them doing that. In Australia the arty people and the media would abuse them for being boors. There's a special term for it — 'ocker'. But here, they're just ordinary people, Swedes."

As we turned the last corner before Karin's, Elizabeth pointed excitedly to a small tree in a garden. It was tropical-looking almost, bright green leaves and scarlet flowers.

"That's a rowan", she said.

"Also called a mountain ash — 'whose eyes were blue, with rowan-berry lips!' . . ."

"Oh well", she said, red lips moving carefully in the cold air. "Now we've done what we set out to do . . . see a rowan. Now we can eat with clear consciences."

We ate a huge meal. Cold meat, cheese, vegetables, lots of fruit juice and fat slabs of rich cake. We ate in the sunroom, its broad windows giving us the sun, light ruffled across the waves on the Lake. I had time to consider how I came to be sitting there, how I had come by such luck. After the meal Elizabeth went out to her room to sleep, and I did some reading in my room. Staring out occasionally through a window set in cream-colored walls, I watched clouds phase themselves against the sun. The light became pitchy, almost unearthly. There were dim speckles on the dark water in the middle of the lake, a light grey sheen nearer the shore. A speedboat charged down the inshore part, and chop battered itself to spray on the pontoon jetty. The feeling was one of a descending haze, that tepid, familiar fog, like five beers or three hours sleep. When the clouds parted, the cold-washed blue seemed unattainably distant, a crazy patchwork skyblue. I was day-dreaming, and then I was dreaming.

I awoke to find my book on the floor, the room chilly and quite dark. The window was now simply slate-grey, grey clouds, grey waters streaked with stray winds. Somehow I shook the stupor out of my head, opening the window and letting the fresh evening air blow into my lungs. Then I had to awaken Elizabeth, because Karin had prepared another enormous feed. Neither of us knew how to say 'no' in terms of assured politeness, so we ate, and then we ate some more. The telephone alone saved us from pure gluttony. It was the neighbors, one-hundred metres away. Hassa, whose father had driven us in the morning, was inviting us to partake in the great Swedish social institution: the sauna. Karin's grey eyes took on a sparkle, banishing her usual reserve, as she translated the invitation to us and we accepted. We left the uneaten food and dishes

on the table for the morning, as we could not be late for our sauna.

It was about half-an-hour later that Hassa and I sat drinking vodka, while Elizabeth and Karin joined two other women in the "ladies turn" downstairs. Hassa said they'd be about thirty minutes down there.

He was very proud of his quite passable English, which he showed off in front of his two middle-aged mates, husbands of the women downstairs.

"We'll have a few drinks", he said, lying back in his padded armchair, "vodka, whisky, beer", he said a bit boyishly, "then we will go downstairs, into the sauna. We won't have it too hot . . . about 80 degrees."

Not being a native of health clubs, nor given to frequent the houses of rich people in Australia, I felt compelled to ask him whether this temperature was given in the Celsius or Fahrenheit scale. But I had my very strong suspicion.

"Celsius", he said, "of course", waving his hand in dismissal, trying to appear mildly shocked but doing it too mildly. "And then, after we are in the sauna for a few minutes, we shall go outside and swim in the sea."

"The sea?"

"Oh, I am sorry. What do you call in English . . . the big water?"

"The lake."

"Yes, that's it. We will go outside and swim in the lake." I was still struck by the boyishness, although now he was more of an enfant-terrible. No mean feat for a thirty-five year old chartered accountant.

"But it's freezing outside", I said, myself now smiling broadly as well. It was all very Mexican bandito stuff, mocking and daring with a grin.

"Don't worry, it's good for you. The doctors say that. Very, very good for you. You will like it, I promise."

The other pair, who couldn't speak any English, just sat perched over straight double-whiskies, and smiled broadly at each other. They had obviously picked up the gist. Hassa beamed at them, and I felt the situation to be hopeless. I felt hapless. Hassa was built just as I'd imagined in Australia that a classic Swede would look. Tall, thick-set, corn-blond hair, curly and short-ish, piston legs, barrel chest and a bellow of a laugh to match. The gut looked as if it fancied the grog and groceries a little too much. He was almost a bully in his self-confidence, and I learned later he was exceptionally outgoing for a Swede. After a few vodkas, nothing could stop him from monstering this antipodean weed into the black Hjalmaren waters. He added, as if it were incidental, that the water might be close to zero degrees. But this didn't seem possible to me, the season still being so close to summer.

In the circumstances, I decided the only sensible thing to do was to keep drinking. This was heartily approved behavior, from all three comrades. In my more lucid moments, however, which already were becoming rarer, this alcohol intake seemed unwise, given the considerable water-loss I'd experience in the sauna. Even with the fairly moderate temperature (so Hassa assured me) that we'd be in I'd read that boozing is a dangerous thing before a sauna. I surmised then, that in modern Sweden, with its elaborate social ritual and its nothing-left-to-chance, drinking before a sauna is probably one of the few real dangers one can find. I eventually decided against this data from those increasingly rare lucid moments, however, on the basis of the fact that only a considerably intoxicated individual would jump into a freezing Swedish lake in the middle of the night. I would have to be so. So I kept drinking.

A few minutes later, Elizabeth walked back into the room. She was clean and bright, and happy. Her pale skin gleamed, and a lot of stiffness seemed to have left her body. But the really surprising thing to me about Elizabeth's sauna was that she's taken it at all. I just could not imagine her naked in a hot little box with other people naked there too. It clashed with everything I'd perceived about her so far, and I could only put it down to the persuasive power of praxis; of being in a situation where you are doing Something, and the normal operation of that Thing seems to overrule without argument your everyday prejudices and predispositions.

Hassa, in the meantime, was showing definite signs of being a bit pissed. He came across the room towards me, mouth flapping wide as he told me about how good it was to jump in the sea when it was near zero degrees, but all I was doing was thinking about Elizabeth's body, now in a towelling dressing gown, sitting before me, discreetly sipping at some brandy concoction.

The body, of course, would have pale skin all over it, because of her skin type, because of her native climate, and because she didn't exercise enough in the sun and ate the wrong things, which would also cause her to have flab. She obviously had that. Her back would be just a little bent (from carrying bags, books etc), and

her shoulders and legs serviceable, if not striking. I could visualise dark mats of wiry hair beneath her arms, between her legs. Her body, I was certain, would be so reliable, like an Austin automobile. She was like Great Britain itself, I was even more certain. Iron in the soul, heart of glass.

Hassa's broad laugh brought me back to that room, in a summer house on Hjalmaren, and I saw the other men had already risen from their seats, moving towards the stairs leading down to the sauna. I just smiled a goodbye to Elizabeth, who was locked in a conversation with Karin about words, and followed them. I went in last, closed the door behind me, and then the heat came up and just slapped me in the chest. I debated whether to tell my new Swedish buddies of my deep personal conviction that I had a bad heart, along with a proven aversion to being locked in a small room with a group of others who were fighting for the scarce resource of fresh air. But I didn't. I smiled optimism and took my place on a pine bench next to Hassa. If I survive, if I get to put those clothes back on, and that set of glasses, just outside this door, then I survive. If you get back alive, as someone told me before I left Australia, the trip's a success. That was all I was hoping for now.

The pine-panelled sauna seemed very cramped with the four of us inside it. It was only about three metres by one-and-a-half, with a ceiling two metres high. It seemed stuffed with human flesh and fat, all bursting in ribbons of sweat. The electric fire and hot stones were in one corner, the small bucket of water and ladle sitting menacingly beside it. My pores were already right down to business, getting as much moisture as possible out onto my skin for evaporation. I was finding it hard to breathe, and already struggling to keep calm and not make a fool of myself. My hair hung in dopey strings across my face. Hassa must have noticed something, because he showed me the air vent in the corner, and moved to let me sit by it. I was feeling a little better when one of the other men poured water onto the hot stones. The hiss was instantaneous, and I saw as much as felt the heavy waves of heat emanate and move slowly from the stones, towards me and then through my skin and into my flesh. Water flowed steadily from my body now, and the Swedes smiled politely at me. More water, then more water. With all this extra steam, the temperature soon hit the planned eighty degrees. One of the men had to leave the room. He was the one who'd been putting water on the stones all the time. Served him right. Hassa said the man had gone for a lukewarm shower before returning — but he didn't come back. I said little, just concentrated on conserving my strength, keeping my equilibrium. I tried not to think about the person who'd once told me that 140 degrees Fahrenheit is the body's tolerable maximum. I just concentrated, on being calm. And slowly, I became calm.

Soon the other older man left, without any excuses this time. That just left Hassa and myself in the sauna. He was still smiling, as he had been for some time now, slowly brushing the sheets of sweat from his skin.

"Hot, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes", I said. "But I'm getting used to it now I think", I added bravely, somewhat foolishly, because immediately Hassa put more water on the rocks. Only this time, I saw he was more sparing than the others had been.

"This is not too bad for Sweden", he said.

"Oh?" I said, sweating buckets.

"Yes, most Swedish people have their sauna at this heat. But in Finnland, ah, that's where you get the *real* sauna."

He paused for effect, wiping water off his face. Without my glasses, and with the incessant drip of sweat in my eyes, Hassa was at best an ill-defined blur in the steam.

"Yes, they take their sauna at 120 degrees. And when they are finished they go outside their houses and into the snow. They cut a hole in the ice and jump in the water below. It is very invigorating."

"God! Have you ever done that?"

"Oh no", he smiled generously. "Only the Finns do that. We Swedes like our comfort too much."

"But it must be dangerous when the temperature is *that* high?"

"Oh yes, a little perhaps", he conceded. "There are a few people who died of heart attack. But the main problem is in the accidents."

"Accidents?", I felt the start of the demise of my hard-won calm.

"Yes, the door locks itself and then the people can't get out. At that temperature the body can't survive for more than a few minutes. There are a lot of deaths — but now the Finnish Government has brought in new laws about building saunas. You know, even at this temperature we couldn't survive long if we were locked in here . . . . . ."

He got up and said he was going out to have a warm shower. I was very relieved when the

door opened normally, and when it did I got a delightful rush of cold air into my lungs. I was even more relieved when Hassa returned from his shower a few minutes later to find me still living and breathing in that tiny pine box. From the open doorway he said it was time to go and swim in the lake, and that's when my doubts recommenced.

We walked across the cold, crew-cut grass in front of his house, through a small brush thicket and then down to the shore. It was black. The air, the water, both black. The wind had dropped completely. My confused senses attempted but failed to determine whether my hot body was freezing in this night air.

Then Hassa walked in front of me, into the water.

"You must go in very slowly", he said, very slowly. "Very slowly indeed. Or else you could shock your body into unconsciousness. Go in like this."

He waded in extremely carefully, and the water eddied around the middle of his calves. I grasped the pontoon jetty on my right with one hand, to steady myself, and just followed him in. I was thinking something about barbarian customs, something about Vikings with axes, and something about Australia.

The water was a silent excitement to my skin, shocking but quite bearable. Slowly, deliberately, I inched that blackness higher on my skin, until the water flowed past one of the really delicate places, and I found to my surprise my balls were still there, underwater. The flow then pushed into my stomach, my solar plexus, then started pressing insistently against my chest. There was a dead weight against heart and lungs, my breath came in long gasps, my heart just knocked away. The blood was thudding mechanically through the veins in my skull, and a cool, rational voice began telling me how to go on was absolute insanity. The romantic in me said I must go on, I had to. Mumbled words which sounded like "character", "strength", and also "national identity". Strange words in a freezing Swedish lake in autumn. The other side of the dichotomy just went on talking about "insanity", and "barbaric custom".

And then it seemed I had all the time in the world to think. And I took the time, because there were a lot of things to think about. I gave the voices full play to put their respective cases. The rational voice pointed out that I could well be exposing my body to great danger. After all, I only had the word of this leering, jeering Swede that it was not dangerous. It earnestly advised a return to shore before greater risk could occur. But the other voice became just as strident in recommending a continuation of this process. It opted for Australian nationalism as its banner, saying the Swede would assess all Australians by my actions. Could I make a test-case for myself, and my national identity, out of this? The rational voice questioned the use of national identity, especially with a dead body involved. The romantic answered with a spat reply about Byron. Byron? This was Sweden, not Greece. And yet, the Romantic was saying, and yet . . . sometimes it's important to do absolutely stupid thing to learn something about oneself. It urged I make this swim, as an Australian. Be "an Australian".

The romantic summoned up the appropriate images. Lawson, in Darlinghurst, and London; the leader of the Push and the Bastard from the Bush; and those poor bastards they sent to Turkey, who volunteered and who paid their price to the Empire; Johnny O'Keefe, Australian in the shadow of American music but still fighting; Fanny Bay and Japanese fighter-planes, Australian teenage gunners; Phar Lap; Don Dunstan shopping on Norwood Parade, discussing railway takeovers in pink hotpants and then reading a poem; Castlemaine 4 X; Ben Hall & Ned; officials from the Amalgamated Metalworkers and Shipwrights Union dealing with General Motors; a V.F.L. Premiership side; kangaroo and koala; Kew; Pine Gap and Northwest Cape; Kath Walker and Dennis Walker; and then there were my parents, in their Adelaide Housing Trust home, and my house, my cats; Red; Granite Island, Victor Harbor . . .

I had criticized Australia to myself as I crossed half of Europe. And I found nationalism unattractive anyway, philosophically, preferring to seek idealistic salvation in the 'commonness of humanity'. But the cultural artifacts that came to me could not be denied. They were part of Australia, a place I was born, a place of intrinsic value. They were part of me, they were totally valid, on any national, international, Kosmic level. And I realized that if I was going to do this set of artifacts the justice they deserved, I would have to swim in the water. The Swede had made that clear. If I did not swim, I was certain this Swede, this European, would see the lack not just in me, but in Australia itself. I owed it to all those faces, all those things, to prove him wrong. And all the time, the rational

voice was telling me quite coolly how nationalism is a stupid emotion, and even more stupid is to swim in a freezing northern lake at night.

But I had decided to show Hassa, and the others, that Australia lacked nothing. I suddenly felt very sick at the weight of destructive criticism Australia had directed against itself, and let others direct at it. One thing was decided. If I was to come to terms with Australia as my country, my valid past and present, I'm going to have to dive. For Broken Hill, I'm going to have to dive. I am going to have to dive.

I hear a splash, and there is a ringing sound. The water sizzles over my skull and I feel my hair sweep back. I start to swim, numb yet all senses completely active. The water is icy sinew against my muscle. There are saws, singing saws, and way across the water tiny lights are winking. I pass Hassa, who's only gone in a few seconds before me. He says we'd better make for the jetty. Reaching it, I stop for a moment and tread water. He swims up to me.

"You did it!" He sounds very surprised and I am satisfied.

"Yes."

"What do you think?"

"As you Swedes say, it's very invigorating."

Then his voice gets an urgency.

"Now it's time to get out. We've been in long enough."

I don't feel like getting out. Now I want to see how long *he* can last. It is a maniacal wish, all from the romantic voice which has now broken into song. The rational voice has fallen silent.

"Come on Kelly, we must get out . . . . . Now!"

I got out first. Slowly, I'm climbing the rungs of the ladder, onto the pontoon jetty. Behind me I can hear and feel Hassa, keeping very close as he tries to maximise the amount of his body that is out of the water. It seems very late indeed, and I move lazily, letting him have just a few more moments in contact with that black, freezing water. Then I relent, climb up onto the boards of the jetty, and they feel very warm to me. The air is blood-temperature, tepid. Looming above me are the broad windows of the house, heads talking in them, holding up glasses full of drink. I feel very, very good. I lay out on the planks, soaking in this balmy night air, then skip the last few metres along the narrow jetty to the shore and the lawns. I hear Hassa behind me.

"That was good, eh?"

"Great", I smile.

"Now we shall go inside and have some food and drinks I think."

I feel hungry, which I'd been warned I might. But nevertheless, after all I've eaten today I'm still surprised. I've eaten those two huge meals, and I dimly remember some kind of soup early this morning . . . or was that late morning . . .? Could it have been today?

We go in, dress in the bathroom, and go upstairs. Hassa walks into the living room first, laughing.

"These Australians are very robust", he says.

"Oh?" says Karin, half shocked. "Did he go into the lake?"

"Yes", says Hassa, beaming. "And he wouldn't come out, — or let me out. The water was freezing. Ha — ha."

Everyone laughed with him.

Elizabeth walked over to me, wet lips with a warm smile.

"So you're not such a weed after all?"

"Perhaps not", I smiled back.

"Why did you do it?"

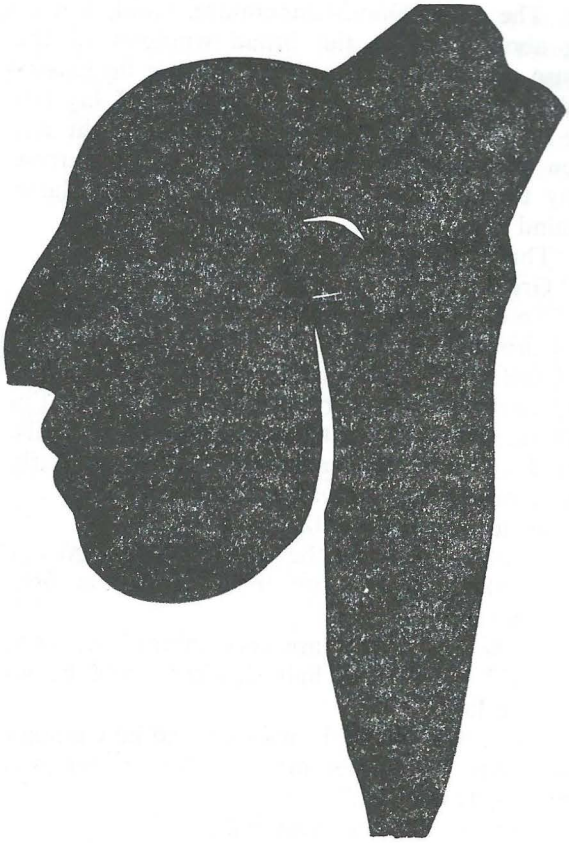
"A lot of strong reasons. Would you believe nationalist ones . . .?"

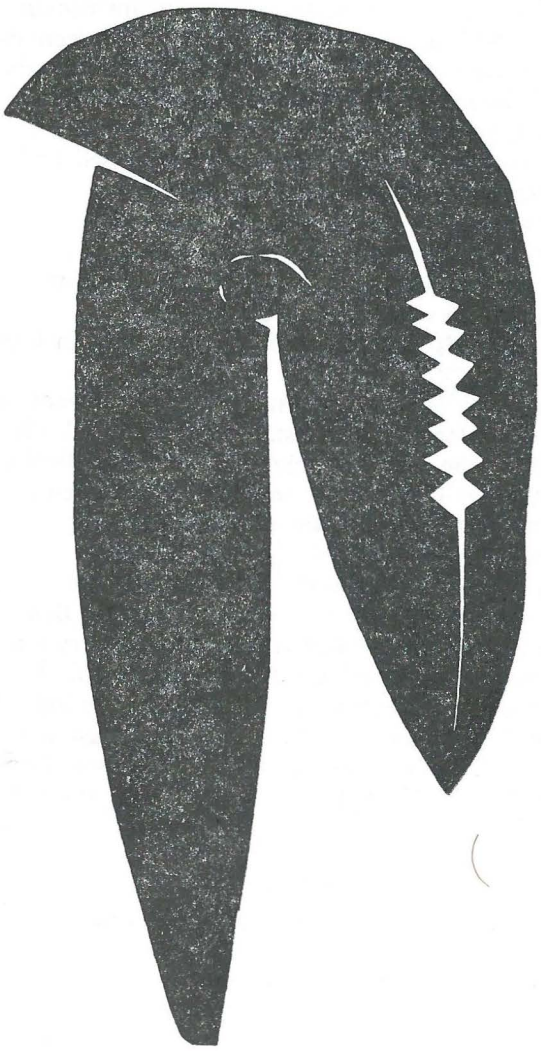
She looked at me quizzically, and someone handed me a beer.

"To the grand final."

"To the grand final", she repeated, and she still wore that quizzical face.

Larry Buttrose's poems, stories and journalism have been published in a range of newspapers and journals. He lives in South Australia.





Joel Elenberg

MICHAEL DENHOLM

Cultism

The 1968 Generation and the cult of new writing in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s

One of the most interesting phenomenons in Australian literature since the 1960s is the cult of new writing by young Australian writers, the self-described generation of 1968. This phenomenon is something that is worth examining especially as it was seen by its participants as a radical act, a dramatic change from previous Australian literary history. This article examines why this change occurred, but, more importantly, examines its validity, the extent to which it really was a radical act.

There were many reasons for the cult of new writing, writing modelled on overseas models, especially American ones. For a start, these Australian writers were very young and predominantly urban based. They found the writing of their elders to be stuffy and irrelevant. In their attitudes they reflected those of youth of their time, who were very questioning, if not insulting, to the values of their elders, most of which they considered to be wanting. They especially reacted against what they saw as an Anglo Saxon establishment ensconced in the universities. Instead they turned to American and European, particularly French models, writers such as Duncan, Creeley, Olson, Kerouac, Ferlingetti, Ginsberg and Dorn, and expressed life as they saw it, sex, drugs, rock and roll, the inner city with all its introversion and fragmentation. The titles of their books reflected these concerns, e.g. *Aspects of the Dying Process*, *Living Together*, *The Short Story Embassy* (Michael Wilding), *Crying in the Garden* (Suzanne Holly Jones), *The Beginning of Everything and The End of Everything Else* (Christine Townsend), *Mother I'm Rooted, Come to me my Melancholy Baby* (Kate Jennings), *All That False Instruction* (Elizabeth Riley), *Massive Road Trauma* (Colin Talbot), *Here We Are, The Rooms* (Kris Hemensley), *A Collapsible Man* (Laurie Clancy), *Wrappings* (Vicki Viidikas), *Futility and Other Animals* (Frank Moorhouse), *The Eye of Angels* (Ross Fitzgerald), *Drug Poems* (Michael Dransfield), *The Lost Forest* (Charles Buckmaster), *The What of Sane* (Tim Thorne).

Above all, what these writers had was energy. Thus a whole range of little magazines and small presses emerged to publish their work.

But these writers had more than energy. They also possessed the arrogance and ambition of their generation. They did not want just to have their own voice. They, like many other movements of writing before them, wanted to replace the older traditions and hierarchies. They wanted to be seen as the main voice of their time.

There is nothing that is necessarily wrong with all this. Ambition is not always a bad thing. But there has to be something of substance to it, especially when these writers were so critical of everything that had gone before them and saw their writing as having a radical thrust. For Australian writing has just not been dominated by an Anglo-Saxon elite based in universities. As John Docker and Drusilla Modjeska have recently pointed out, there is a far richer tradition than simply the metaphysical tradition (Boyd, White, Richardson, Brennan, Slesser, Fitzgerald, Stewart and McAuley) taught in the universities, e.g. writers of the 1930s such as Vance Palmer, Eleanor Dark, M. Barnard Eldershaw, Frank Dalby Davison, Leonard Mann, Kylie Tenant, Dymphna Cusack, Xavier Herbert, Katharine Prichard, Miles Franklin, Jean Devanney and Betty Roland, and social realist writers in the 1950s such as Alan Marshall, Frank Hardy, Eric Lambert, John Morrison, Dorothy Hewett, etc.[1] But the young writers of the late 1960s were ignorant of these traditions.

As Michael Wilding, himself an exception to this, has written:

'The new wave of Australian writers is totally

unconcerned about "Australianness". The writers are simply writers; they haven't immersed themselves in the work of the classic Australian writers — Clarke, Furphy, Brennan, Henry Handel Richardson; they've probably read hardly any Patrick White. Their reading is contemporary writing, whatever its nationality from the U.S.A., from Latin America, from Europe — not much from England anymore.'[2]

It is revealing to read John Tranter's comments to his peers in the recent *The American Model, Influence and Independence in Australian poetry,* edited by Joan Kirkby. In his chapter entitled 'Anaesthetics of the new Australian poetry', Tranter states that the last thing we need at the present state of Australian poetry is a set of principles of good taste and appreciation of beauty, a philosophy of art, an aesthetics.[3] The title Tranter chooses for this essay on the poets he admires is surely extraordinary for a poet. Does he believe that their work is, and should be, an agent that produces insensibility? Not for Tranter 'the triumph of the human being to feel in the teeth of the computerized blankness of twentieth century existence' that Fay Zwicky admires in the work of Malamud, Roth and Bellow.[4] The criterion he uses to justify the validity of these writers is their quantity, their sheer mass of published writing, some twenty thousand pages of creative and critical writing as Tranter describes it,[5] as if sheer quantity of work was something in itself to be admired. It is not surprising that these writers have produced such a mass of writing. Modesty was not their best quality with access to their own presses and magazines, due to advances in technology and through taking over magazines, such as Robert Adamson and others did with *New Poetry*. The sky was obviously the limit, especially when more established writers such as Rodney Hall and Thomas Shapcott championed their cause.

Not to these writers what Shirley Hazzard describes in the words of her character Ted Tice, the 'atrocious sustained effort . . . required, I find, to learn and to do anything thoroughly — especially if it's what you love' and the seven years' labor that Shirley Hazzard is supposed to have spent on writing her novel *Transit of Venus*. Why bother going through the established channels of publishing, and the vigor and professionalism and the improvement of the craft of writing this should entail, when you could set up your own publishing, distribution and review network?

These new writers have also seen their work as being in some way radical, even though much of it was art for art's sake, and, in the eyes of many, dubious art at that. Much of it also was derivative of its overseas models, making its claims to be at all radical ironic, living as we are in a society dominated by American capitalism. Some recent writing on art has raised several questions in my mind about the validity of the work of this generation, most notably the ideas of Peter Fuller in his book *Beyond the Crisis in Art*. Much of modern art Fuller considers is an abnegation of the artists' responsibility and is, in fact, what he calls pornography of despair. Rather than trying to express the deepest meaning of existence and the striving of human evolution many artists have simply acquiesced to the conditions of their times, have forsaken the heroic struggle he feels art should entail. Much of this is true of modern writing too. Consider for instance Sylvia Kantarizis' comment in a poem in the anthology edited by Kate Jennings, *Mother, I'm Rooted:* "Some poems fall anyhow, all of a heap, dishevelled legs apart in loneliness and desperation, and you talk about standards."

In an article written on American art of the 1950s called 'The Aesthetic of Indifference',[7] Moira Roth has demonstrated how artists such as Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenburg, faced with the political climate of their time, the Cold War of the 1950s, retreated to an aesthetic of indifference, an art of amusement, coolness and neutrality, so that even in the more radical 1960s, the artistic counterparts to this were in her opinion infrequent and bland. The aesthetic of indifference, Roth argues, advocated neutrality of feeling and denials of commitment in a period that otherwise might have produced an art of passion and commitment'.[8]

Roth's comments are very relevant to many Australian writers of the late 1960s and 1970s. For these writers, directly and indirectly were influenced by these artists. Richard Kostelanetz, for example, the great advocate of the ethics of small publishing, most notably in his book *The End of Intelligent Writing,* was also a promoter of these artists. Much that has gone under the title of new writing in Australia in the late 1960s and the 1970s is also an aesthetic of indifference, of art for art's sake and little else. Consider for instance Ken Bolton's excerpt, the first half of *Social Treatise* in the magazine *Magic Sam,* edited by Bolton, Sal Brereton and Anna Couani.

Bolton begins the piece by stating:

'I spend some time looking out the window.
I wonder how to end the poem'

He continues on this task for a while, describing his feelings writing a poem, whether it be while watching people going into the flats across the road, while going to the fridge, looking at a cloud, listening to records or thinking of the film *Taxi Driver*. Then he moves to his feelings about the Australian literary scene.

'Profound,' he states, 'is just a word that you use when you say you're sick of something and you're weary with it.' Let New York be the ideal literary location, he adds. The reason for this judgement, 'since I don't know anything about it.' From these comments, Bolton discusses his literary scene and then states:

'. . . I want my poems to mention politics to be able to talk of it in the same breath as anything else. I want the poems to open out but, literary politics?!! Perhaps it is a first step . . .' As regards a particular political event, the sacking of the Whitlam Government in 1975 Bolton writes:

'— a poem I wrote, the last long one, doesn't mention politics, yet it is very much about the climate *of* the Labor Defeat, our desperation, of how it felt. Admittedly the panic and hysteria were due to our own powerlessness before what was impending and were themselves exciting; the "cause" was too terrible to speak about. So it was about *The last summer* but it never said'. 'Perhaps', he adds, 'That's alright, every poem has its course to run. It was a poem about *how*, it felt, still I *wonder* about it.'

Literature can do a variety of things. It can increase our sensibility, enable us to empathise with the minds of other people, and excite us with the possibility of what may be rather than what is. It can also perform the service that Dorothy Green has outlined,[9] that of portraying the way that our society is controlled, by exploring the operations of companies, the stock exchange, the political parties, etc., so that we are in a more informed position to be able to undertake changes in society. But, for a writer to do that, requires enormous powers of perseverance and determination, qualities of research that Green finds sadly lacking in contemporary Australian writers. The trouble with the prescription of John Tranter is that if literature has, as he believes, no humanising power or redeeming value, it is simply reduced to an aesthetic of indifference, of art for art's sake, of mere amusement or diversion, leaving the writer in the predicament Bolton describes of being left feeling powerless in the enormity of the events we are confronted with in modern life. As Robert Gray argues:

'Those who simply reproduce overseas gimmickry, or come up with their own, are helping to destroy, here, the prestige of poetry. From being something of great significance in peoples' lives, because of its responsiveness to life, they are reducing poetry to being, at most, just another lightweight, marginal diversion.'[10]

Such a powerlessness is the last thing we need in a society when more and more aspects of life are being controlled by technology, where people are losing more and more skills, where even sexuality is being used to control people. Mere documentation of despair and powerlesness is not enough. Writers can encourage people to marvel at the beauty of life amidst all its sufferings, so that we can bring about what could be possible rather than what is now.

Notes

1 John Docker, 'University Teaching of Australian Literature', *New Literature Review*, No. 6, pp. 3-7, and Drusilla Modjeska, *Exiles at Home; Australian Women Writers 1925-1945*. Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1981.
2 On page 6 of his editorial in *Stand Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 5-6.
3 *The American Model*, page 99.
4 *Ibid* page 98.
5 *Ibid* page 105.
6 Sue Nichterlein, 'Shirley Hazzard: first since McCullough', *The National Times*, 8-14/6/1980, page 12.
7 *Art Forum*, November 1977, pages 46-53.
8 *Ibid* page 53.
9 Dorothy Green, 'Australian Writers as Social Critics — do they exist?' *Island Magazine*, No. 9/10, 1982, pp. 17-21.
10 *The American Model*, page 136.

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books

EMERGING INDONESIANS, SEX AND POLITICS

Bruce Grant

Pramoedya Ananta Toer: *This Earth of Mankind* (Penguin Books, $5.95).

It is an interesting question why so many South American writers achieve recognition in the West, especially as Nobel Laureates, while so few Asian writers do, and I suspect the answer is simple. South Americans write in Spanish, which is widely read and skilfully translated, and their culture is Christian even if individually they are not. Asian writers, on the other hand, often have a culture, a religion and a language of their own which have been associated with the nationalist struggle against colonial rule and to which they can now turn with a sense of liberation and discovery, but which in turn create difficulties for them.

I do not know enough of the history of South America to understand why the indigenous cultures have not survived as they have in Asia. They certainly existed, whether as tribal customs or as ancient civilisations, like those of the Mayas and Incas. Were the Spanish simply more ruthless than those other Europeans who travelled eastwards to conquer the world? Has the Americanising of the southern continent forced Spanish into the role of defender of the faith? In either or any case, the European quality of South American writing gives it access to the wider world, and also a bourgeois charm, very much in the European tradition. Even radical South American writers apparently find it hard to write from any other standpoint than that of the cultivated and educated middle class.

English gives some Asian writers (notably from India, the Philippines and Singapore) access to Western readers, but in general the persistence of local languages and religions other than Christianity, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, provide the writer with powerful alternatives. Even in, say, India, where the English language is widely used by serious Indian writers, Hindi, the national language, and the regional dialects are increasingly popular, notably in film and theatre. Because of these non-European cultural roots, Asian writers hang on to their past with political and moral tenacity, as representing something real and important about themselves before they were overwhelmed, as it were, in a moment of weakness.

The novel under review makes the point for Indonesian writers, for whom it would be eccentric to write in Dutch. Whatever regional language they work in, all Asian writers are supported by the model of their Chinese and Japanese colleagues, who would not think of using any other language than their own.

It is important for Australians to understand this process, partly for their own instruction as inheritors of the English tradition, and until recently contemptuous of any other, and also because it is necessary to appreciate what is happening culturally in countries nearby. The politics and commerce of Asia are now better known in Australia, but cultural appreciation is slower, indeed slow.

So to Pramoedya Ananta Toer, whose book brings all these threads together in a surprising way. It was written in Buru island detention camp, where he was a political prisoner, and became a best-seller before it was banned by the Indonesian government in 1981. A second secretary at the Australian Embassy in Djakarta translated the book from Indonesian into English, and in the subsequent controversy, was recalled to Canberra. Penguin Books, Melbourne, then published it. So the strange, and at the time grudging, Australia-Indonesia relationship bore surprising fruit, more

piquant and perhaps more nourishing than formal cultural exchanges and than even perhaps the informal sub-cultural traffic between Sydney and Bali.

In simple outline, it is the story of a young Javanese in Surabaya at the turn of the century, when the Indonesian nationalist movement was stirring, who matures rapidly through sexual-political experiences. When we meet him he is in love with the image of Queen Wilhelmina. When we leave him he is being forcibly separated by Dutch law from his Eurasian wife, who is the daughter of a Dutchman's Javanese concubine. I use "sexual" precisely and "political" loosely. He is a bright-eyed student from a respectable family and his encounter with the fanciful girl who becomes his wife, her mysteriously intelligent native mother and her degraded white father, has an almost permanently erotic quality.

Here is an early meeting between Annelies, overdressed and bejewelled, self-consciously descending the staircase while Minke, a newcomer to the elaborate house, thinks how much nicer she would look in simple clothes, or perhaps none at all.

> "She dressed up for you . . ." whispered Nyai.
>
> Annelies walked up to us while still smiling and perhaps with a *thaank you* readied in her heart. But before I could get in my compliment, Nyai got in first:
>
> "From whom did you learn to dress up and adorn yourself like that?"
>
> "Ah, mama!" she exclaimed, prodding her mother's shoulder and glancing at me with her big eyes. Her face had gone red. I was also embarrassed to hear such a conversation between mother and daughter: too intimate to be heard by a stranger. Yet near Mama I felt I had the right to be resolute. And indeed I had to leave behind an impression of being a male who was resolute, interesting, dashing, an unappeased conqueror of the Goddess of Beauty. In front of the Queen I think I would have had to exhibit the same attitude. That is the cock's plumage, the deer's antlers, the symbol of virility.
>
> I knew what was proper. I did not involve myself in the affairs of mother and daughter.

The writing here is fairly typical — straight faced irony and an underlying tough simplicity. It is of course hard to tell in translation, especially when the writer may be trying, as here, to suggest colonial social attitudes of the turn of the century, but readers who come to this book because of its reputation expecting a heavy dose of social realism will be disappointed. The style is light and the politics elusive. Pramoedya writes for scene and character and long after the Association Theory (a progressive, anti-colonial thesis which Minke struggles to understand) is forgotten, the reader will recall people and settings.

Minke is both central character and historical personality. "People call me Minke . . . my own name . . . for the time being I need not tell." This volume is the first of a set of four and perhaps later Minke reveals himself more passionately, but he is obviously modern Indonesian man, here trapped in a thicket of feudal intricacies, partly created by Dutch law and partly by Chinese commerce. An atmosphere of corruption and decay pervades the story. Minke is tantalised by sex and money, but holds instinctively to ideas of education and human progress which the author clearly wishes to indicate helped to form the intellectual base of the nationalist movement.

The reader is never confident that the forces of history are on Minke's side. Whether this is a skilful effect, as indeed Indonesia's fate was not at all evident at the turn of the century, is not clear. The writing has an undertone of despair, which could reflect Pramoedya's present view of Indonesia. In addition, Minke's own nationalism is complex. He is a native and subject to crude and incessant prejudice, but he is also "modern man", part of the future, and the Dutch have more to offer than his own feudal people.

This is a difficult theme for left-wing writers; cultural nationalism can be reactionary. Pramoedya, who is an accomplished and experienced writer, is not entirely successful, although the narrative carries the reader along. The book leaves the reader with a sense of a dispirited people, despite the hinted courage of the last words.

> 'The sound of the carriage wheels grinding over the gravel could be faintly heard fading away into the distance, finally disappearing. Annelies was setting sail for where Queen Wilhelmina sat on the throne. Behind the door, we bowed our heads.
>
> "We've been defeated, Ma," I whispered.
>
> "We fought back, Child . . . as well and honorably as possible." '

Why was the book banned? According to Pramoedya's translator Max Lane, who contributes

a useful introduction, the authorities were concerned about the effect on "public order" and believed that the author had adroitly sneaked in disguised elements of "forbidden ideologies". Readers outside Indonesia will find it difficult to identify them. Perhaps they appear more clearly in later volumes. Any writer working under political censorship has to employ disguises and metaphors and Pramoedya, although not himself a member of the Indonesian Communist Party, was identified closely enough with its cultural aims to be detained without trial from 1965 to 1979, so that he can be in no doubt that his ideas are deeply suspect.

Ideological censorship is always rigid and almost always stupid, as appears to have been the case with this book. Indonesians are not a dogmatic people and indeed are more tolerant and flexible than most, so that this kind of censorship is especially insensitive. The problem may have been not the ideas, but the fact that the book became a best-seller. From such a well-known opponent of the regime, this was itself a form of public insubordination. For the writer, translator and two publishers, however, the ban has been an unexpected bonus and readers on this side of the Arafura Sea at least have reason to be grateful for it.

Bruce Grant, author of Indonesia *(1964), recently published* Gods and Politicians *(Allen Lane). Australian High Commissioner in India 1973-76 he is currently Advisor to the Victorian Minister for the Arts.*

TWO POETS

Frank Kellaway

Robert Adamson: *The Law at Heart's Desire* (Prism, $9.50).
Philip Martin: *A Flag for the Wind* (Longman Cheshire, $4.95).

Secret Depths

One of the central themes of Robert Adamson's *Cross the Border* was the poet's attempt to penetrate appearances, to break the barrier of mental sets and of language, to reach a reality beyond them. In reviewing that volume in 1978 I complained that though he gave us a vivid impression of the experience of breaking through, all he found of the reality when he got there was 'another empty space/without you'. That this was not the fulfilling *empty innermost* of the Tao, but a lonely and frustrating state of being is suggested by the two concluding words.

Now two books later *The Law at Heart's Desire* opens with a metaphysical poem called *Beyond the Pale* in which the imagery is drawn from a journey into a desert landscape. It ends with a grim conclusion of a similar kind. 'So the only permanence is in what we say,/what we imagine through language, a permanence/that is neither within nor beyond the pale —/it is the sole arbiter between the heart and its desire/the law and love's freedom,/the fine and burning line of art, the fence.'

In other places the new book shows the preoccupation with the breakthrough in a rather different way. He quotes Mallarmé: 'There must be something secret in the depth of all things . . .' and I believe that Adamson's greatest strength is his ability to suggest that 'something' triumphantly in a number of poems. My favorite is *Window Frame* which explores the interior world outside the window and the exterior world within. To make the general point it is necessary to quote a whole poem.

> Our talk and the straight trees
> through the window
> closed on human hinges
>
> the cold and dry night comes down
>
> outside the tap drips from its stalk
> into tangled bushes
> wild grass and rock-fern
> fungus rings
> feathery hearted suckers
> burning their delicate fingers in
> cold florescence.
>
> We are framed by the window
> in bed as we return to our bodies
> our world drenched in the sound of the forest.

The simple reversal of the direction of vision in the last stanza is both beautifully suggestive and formally satisfying.

The new poems are more directly personal than were many of those in *Cross the Border*. The dust jacket says '. . . he focuses on our "private life" by writing about his own marriage and how it exists in relationship to the society and country that support it. A central concern is a spiritual life struggling for its emergence in a world that seems reluctant to acknowledge such a possibility. I did not find that this came through in the poems. Many did deal with personal aspects of marriage, jealousy, desolation in absence and moments of

private insight and happiness but they did not justify the claims of the advertiser. Except in occasional references to 'the Law' and to the 'Lords of Order who have declared war/on all the citizens of the City of Heart's Desire', society, exterior to the triangle and the apparently reunited lovers, is more or less ignored. However, if society only exists as a vague bogey in such phrases, (and I see nothing wrong in this except the pretentious and misleading claim of the blurb writer) the natural world is always vividly present and images from it are used for an admirably wide variety of purposes, as here to suggest hauntingly the close of a decade. 'We/don't see, these days a blue wren/ let alone a native dove or a falcon./ The decade ends. We know the night parrot/is finally extinct — we live on, passions wrestle with the thought.'

The Law at Heart's Desire is, for the most part, surer in tone and more homogeneous than *Cross the Border* but it lacks the variety of the earlier book and in some places also the energy. This shows up in slack, prosy rhythms and banal language as in *Glass Bay Sonnets*. I am personally gratefully for the first and a number of the penultimate poems: *Beyond the Pale, Holding, Window Frame, Into Forest, Landscape, Watching Elon,* and *One Saturday.*

Involvement — Detachment

A Flag for the Wind is Philip Martin's third book of poems. The publisher's blurb quotes the Hungarian poet Gyula Urbán as saying. 'This poetry is crystal, but if you cut the crystal it would bleed." Certainly the craftsmanship is immaculate and the language at times is vivid and exciting. The first poem about the Mahogany Ship ends with an image which in its context is unexpected and stimulating 'Dark image/Of a surfer poised inside his cresting wave'. The second poem on *Building a Dam* ends, 'One night/ A drumming on the roof./Our bodies feel/The dark triangle filling.' There is here and in many other poems a very strong feeling of the physical and the actual, of the word made flesh and of the event registered in the nerve and in the bone.

The obverse of this is also apparent in a certain detachment, a stance of dispassionate non-involvement. We are not surprised when a poem begins 'Stone, one woman called me', nor by the clever play he makes of this. When I first read it I found the aloofness of observation in *Nursing Home* quite chilling. It seemed to treat the horror of extreme senility as though it were just an intriguing problem about a state of mind. On re-reading I find I missed the point; the old lady is only partly senile; she is living in two worlds. She is being given credit for seeing something she can't express, an experience beyond the everyday. 'I'm drawn to the edge of a mystery. The mind/I cannot know, what does it matter? She seems/Listening. As a remote landscape listens/To its river in a circle of hills.'

In dramatic poems the detachment is often brilliantly effective. In *A House in Minnesota* it produces beautifully distanced story-telling. There is great variety in his use of dramatic monologue. One of the most powerful and moving is *You Shall Know the Truth* in which an ex-Nazi decides to confess to the head of the documentation centre of the Federation of Jewish Victims of the Nazi Regime. It reminds us of a telling line in an earlier poem, 'Why not, when pity stirs, lament the damned?' It ends strongly as his poems often do. 'Tomorrow in St Stephen's I'll hear Mass,/ And the next day find Wiesenthal. I owe/him and his people a death. A heart of flesh.'

He writes most movingly of all of an experience shared by many poets. 'He found the woman in himself, and found/In every woman he embraced the earth:/It was from her he came and he would soon/Re-enter her. His father's God was dead/ Long since. It was a goddess whom he served./ She spread dark honey on his lips. They sang.'

Apart from that poem, *A Sacred Way*, I enjoyed most, and most of the poety *is* enjoyable, the masterly sequence of poems on Atilla the Hun. On the face of it the subject seems remote from modern experience and yet Martin manages to make each glimpse of history so vivid that we feel as though it all happened yesterday and we were there ourselves. The ordinariness and yet the unexpectedness, as well as the accuracy of the imagery is one of the means by which this is achieved, 'Home the Hun king said little. Idled,/ Waiting like a flag for the wind.'

A Flag for the Wind is one of a new series: Longman Cheshire Modern Poets in soft cover selling for the reasonable sum of $4.95. The format and printing are attractive and, if this is a fair sample, the quality of the work they are promoting is very high indeed. It is heartening to find a well-established publisher prepared to spend so much time, money, care and effort on the production of books of poetry.

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"IS THE PLAGUE EDIBLE?"

Graham Rowlands

Martin Duwell (ed.): *A Possible Contemporary Poetry* (Makar Press, P.O. Box 71, St Lucia 4067, $15.95, $8.95).
John Tranter: *Selected Poems* (Hale & Iremonger, $19.95, $9.95).

Unfortunately, Martin Duwell's book is a shambles. Before arguing the case, however, I'll mention a few enjoyable aspects. I was moved by John A. Scott's account of his post marriage breakup, months in a room bare except for paintings; by Jennifer Maiden's memory of her horrible schooldays; by both the semi-delinquent and public service phases of Rae Desmond Jones' life; by Ken Taylor's political and environmental concerns; by Robert Adamson's educational deprivation and sincere self-criticism. Duwell's interviews, however, don't aim at memoir. They are supposed to clarify and define some controversial issues of contemporary Australian poetry. Although particular interviews do clarify particular poems and poets, the book itself defines nothing.

A Possible Contemporary Poetry is sub-titled "Interviews with thirteen poets from The New Australian Poetry". Only readers with a copy of John Tranter's *The New Australian Poetry* will know which of his 24 comprise Duwell's 13. Only Duwell will ever know *why* he chose *this* 13 for he refrains from even loose definition. Perhaps Tranter's use of the generalized but not meaningless category of Modernism (writing with itself as its subject) to define his 24 made him vulnerable to major exceptions within his own terms. I found six exceptions: Bruce Beaver, Walter Billeter, Charles Buckmaster, Michael Dransfield, Jones and Alan Wearne. Duwell includes only two of the four possible from these six. Does he concede non-Modernism to Beaver and Billeter while still claiming Jones and Wearne as Modernists? He doesn't say. At any rate, how anyone could ascribe Modernism to Jones and Wearne after reading Duwell's interviews with them, I've no idea. Wearne even describes himself as a "Victorian"!

It's easy to list Tranter's genuine Modernists who *aren't* in Duwell's book: Clive Faust, Philip Hammial, Garrie Hutchinson, John Jenkins, Robert Kenny and Tim Thorne. Clearly, Duwell hasn't aimed for a book of Modernist interviews. At least that would have been coherent.

There is, however, a more difficult issue — Tranter's *selection* of poems from the overall work of his 24. Much material in some of Duwell's interviews sounds incongruous when related to Tranter's selection. Ken Taylor repeatedly returns to politics. Nigel Roberts gives a 19th century social definition of his aims. Rudi Krausmann concentrates on poignant exile rather than water lilies writing their own poems. Adamson admits to both his early *Canticles on the Skin* and recent *Where I Come From* being autobiographical writing, unlike his other over-influenced work — work preferred by Tranter. It follows that Duwell's coverage of his group's total output serves to confuse any possible direction for his possible contemporary poetry. If only he'd forgotten about *The New Australian Poetry* and just interviewed anyone he felt like interviewing.

Unfortunately, Duwell accepts Tranter's "generation of '68" as the start of new young Australian poets-to-be. Both the now omitted Beaver and still remaining Ken Taylor were older. John Blight was older still and arguably more influenced by Modernism than either Beaver or Ken Taylor. Since Blight didn't make Tranter's book he can't make Duwell's. Richard Tipping was the right age and arguably also a Modernist. Because he was too political a Modernist for Tranter, however, he can't make Duwell's book either. Amazing omissions! In summary, then, a poetry anthology that admits Beaver, Dransfield, Jones and Wearne could well admit *any* non-Modernist. The same goes for an interview anthology that admits Jones and Ken Taylor.

Again unfortunately, Duwell accepts other Tranterian notions:

> When a history of Australian poetry of the twenty-five years immediately after the Second World War is compiled, it is unlikely that the poets of *The New Australian Poetry* will be asked for contributions. But this very simplification of the opposition seems to support the accuracy of the term 'revolution' for it is common experience that subtle degrees of vice and virtue among the members of an *ancien regime* are lost in the fires.

Well, Dransfield appeared both in Tranter's anthology (no matter how erroneously) *and* Alexander Craig's *Twelve Poets 1950-1970*. The theoretically impossible has been on the shelves for twelve years! When Duwell talks of vice and virtue, revolultion and *ancien regime*, he ignores massive differences of *kind* between, say, Judith Wright and A. D. Hope. Moreover, he ignores those of his poets who not only didn't feel oppressed by the allegedly homogeneous regime but didn't even know the names of their alleged

oppressors. Indeed, he doesn't seem to consider it possible for *other poets* to react against the alleged oppressors *in ways other than Modernism.*

If it's true, as Duwell believes, that Tranter's group is "the most powerful group of interacting talents in the history of poetry in Australia", this might be explained by the go-it-alone tendency of most Australian poets who haven't wanted and don't want to meet as a group, let alone create as one. Since when has huddling together been a literary criterion? Even so, Duwell is right in the sense that Kris Hemensley, Tranter and Adamson have seen themselves as poetic power brokers. Tranter and Hemensley show no signs of giving up. At various points in their interviews, however, Maiden, Jones and Adamson are scornful of poetic pressure groups. Ken Taylor even admits to refusing to read a book foisted on him by Hemensley. Bravo! So at least four poets see being under the influence as something they have grown out of or didn't need anyway, certainly not as a new theory of creativity.

It's disarming of Duwell to say that he hasn't attempted to hide his interviewing gaucheries. In fact, there are few. He knows as much about literary interviewing as anyone in the country. It's just that he should have re-read his interviews carefully.

The interviews show Martin Johnston's and Tranter's similar views on poetry. Johnston's tone, however, is different from Tranter's. And most attractive. He isn't "interested" in writing like 95% of European literature, regarding his kind of poetry as an interest comparable to chess. For him, poetry *does* nothing, least of all communicate like a telegram. It would be easy to outline his theory and practice, briefly expressing disagreement with his theory and as little interest in his practice as he shows in 95% of European literature. Not so with Tranter.

Despite his prowess as a textual critic of any kind of poetry, he always manages to create the impression that only Modernist poetry is alive. Obviously he has been a major partisan editor, organizer and promoter of what he sees as the Modernist revolution in recent Australian poetry. In *Overland* 79 I subjected his editing to tests of logic and history — and found him wanting. I can't do the same for his poetry because I can't arrive at relevant criteria. Nevertheless I'll explore several issues raised in and by his art. What is it? How does it work? What is his relation to it?

Tranter loves saying his poetry is nothing but typing on paper becoming print on pages. This, of course, applies to *all* non-oral literature since Gutenberg. For non-Modernists, it's the *means* to all other kinds of reading experiences created by Western writers over the centuries. According to Tranter, the means *is* the end. He devises literary exercises that aim to enact their own confinement to the page. (I'll return to his inability to so confine himself.)

Poetry based on typewriters errors, intentionally arbitrary similes, the 30 line form, the 100 sonnet book, the order of the alphabet, gross obscurities, real or imagined poets' and critics' creative processes and words in shapes on pages mockingly invested with their own emotions — all this poetry works within a determinist theory of poetic navel-gazing. No one would confuse Tranter with, say, Keats, Hardy or Plath:

> Undo the past. 'One must be absolutely
> modern.' Sure, we can abandons sense
> and sensibility, and all the distinterred
> Romantics
> like a wicked boy punching in a stained glass
> knight,
> we can be witty partly because of our vodka
> slingshots
> and that's enough to kick the European jukebox
> in and
> get a laugh.

The argument, however, doesn't end here. The typewriter error *doesn't* determine Tranter's poem. It causes patterns different from what would have been the case with correct spelling. The intentionally arbitrary simile *isn't* arbitrary. It *has* to be unlike rather than like. For example, an emu can be like a tricycle, a balloon or a gorilla, but not like an ostrich. (I'm not joking; Tranter is.) The page length 30 line form determines the poem's *length* but not its kind. The arbitrary number of 100 sonnets isn't essential for *Crying in Early Infancy* because he's selected from it and changed the order as well. The letters of the alphabet determine the first *letters* of poems in "The Alphabet Murders". The first and other *words* aren't determined by alphabetical letters. It's obvious that "Red Movie" is grossly obscure because, by comparison, the rest of *Selected Poems* is quite intelligible. I'm arguing, then, that Tranter's book can't (repeat *can't*) be either revelled in or dismissed as arbitrary literary game or gimmick.

While it's true that Western literature and theory is the main target for his wisecracks (making them parody) there are quite enough comparisons with non-literary life to make them satire as well. He presents the world as a deadly

serious B grade movie viewed 40 years after release by a sneering, giggling coterie who already view either life itself or any deeply-felt aspirations in life as suitable subjects for comic eruptions of pus, acne, vomit and herpes. This, of course, isn't what Tranter *says* he's doing. Methinks he doth protest too much. True, within a purely literary framework it would be much funnier than most of its comedy seems to me. Less would be at stake. However, it's quite possible he's only vaguely aware of the ramifications of his poetic framework — its necessary relation to the rest of life. No matter how much the reader is supposed to be amused by the contrary, John Tranter put the words on the pages. They must bear some relation to his views, values and, in the end, himself. Listening to him read some of them reinforces my view that he revels in his notion of the truth as a different kind of ganster movie, if only because he's such a master of deadpan performance.

Now to a different sort of evidence for the same argument. Tranter admits to having both loved and hated Rimbaud. This is genuine. Moreover, there are serious political observation poems as early as *Red Movie* and the "Negatives" section of *The Blast Area* and as late as "Enzensberger at 'Exiles' ". Armed with Tranter's expression of liking for fast cars, I see no need to jump through Modernist hoops before deciding on the apt giggle in response to his sex-power-speed-greed poems from the "Cheap Thrills" section of *The Blast Area*. They *aren't* about themselves, although they include the notion that the style should take after the cars, planes and jet set lifestyle. Removed from *Selected Poems* they stand beside non-Modernists without incongruity. Now here's the rub. No matter how ironic it may sound, it's difficult to believe Tranter isn't in love with his recurring woman character Peta. Perhaps it's more obvious to the reader than to the poet:

> I remember Peta at the crossroads braking hard
> in a dangerous shift that quickly gained
> acceptance,
> admirers, a slow disintegration into decadence.
> The smart boys are dressed up, moving out,
> and what was once unique, a gesture, risk
> that stung with beauty, has now become a
> cheapened ritual.
>
> How is it that such things pass from guesswork
> imitation
> into wonder — that much is easy — then to
> dance,
> animal dance beneath the trees? How is it
> that the cafe crowd applauds a riddle,
> when the key—Peta was beautiful, in a phrase—
> would turn their flattery to hate?
> How is it that pain will hunt so far,
> and such a victim?

Peta leads to my final point. Although the reader's initial impression may be one of Tranter's mocking both Western literature and the Western world generally, his range of references is, in fact, quite limited. Rather than wanting him to mock only in the name of peace or justice, it's more salutary to pinpoint the 19th century and 20th century life as the main targets for his contempt. So rather than send him into a *grand mal* seizure of guffaws by referring him to the structure of crystals or the sound of rain on tin roofs or any other sentimental cameo that might prevent life from becoming intolerably painful, I prefer to hope he finds more and more exceptions to love or fear or agonize over in the life and history that so far have escaped his attention. A forlorn hope, possibly. Not, however, if Peta loved John as much as John loved Peta.

The title of this review is a quotation from John Tranter's The Alphabet Murders. *Graham Rowlands has published several books of poetry and has edited anthologies. He lives in Adelaide.*

BRIEF NOTICES

Reviews are a dilemma for a quarterly: there are far too many books deserving of comment for the space we have. This is especially true of poetry and, recently, fiction and regional and institutional histories. Here are some books which deserve greater attention.

Adrian Rawlins: *Festivals in Australia; an intimate history.* (The author, 37 Grove St., Birchgrove, NSW 2041; $3.50 incl. postage.)

This 58 p. booklet offset from typescript and illustrated is of fundamental importance to those interested in Australian popular culture. As the author writes he "was around when things started happening. That was in 1969, in the era of teenage dances in unpainted surf clubs halls and teetotal 'discos' . . ." and since then he has been associated either as a publicist, a compere, or as an assistant organiser with all significant rock and counter-culture festivals from Ourimbah in early 1970 to the Down to Earth and Jim Cairns festivals of recent years.

Rawlins is a shrewd observer, quite aware of the less than love-child, ego and profit drives of some

of the organisers, but he was always genuinely and passionately involved and is particularly informed about contemporary rock on the one hand and on the politics of the 'peace and love' organizations on the other.

This is a surprising little book with some insights into the culture of the last decade and major personalities, such as Dr Cairns, which are unique in my reading. It is quite clear that what has been started here, obviously with some difficulty, should be continued and deepened and a full book written. This should attract a publisher and is well worthy of assistance from the Community Arts Board.

The author will forgive me if I found some of the comments and some of the photographs hilarious. I particularly appreciated the Rev. King who saw the aboriginal spirit of the Cotter. "Oh yes," he said in his matter of fact way, "he was manifesting very strongly while you were all thrashing about in the water." And a splendid photograph of a quite naked Adrian on stage behind an apparently oblivious, and clothed, Jim Cairns.

The author is not hopeful about successful festivals of any size taking place in the immediate future. "All I see is a question mark." The largest crowd ever attracted to an Australian festival was about 35,000 and that apparently is not enough to be economic. "As in so many things that are disappointing in Australia, the fault (if fault there be) lies in that area of the collective psyche which will not dare to love applaud and celebrate our own culture-makers."

Judith Rodriguez: *Witch Heart.* (Sisters, $5.75.)

This attractive collection of fifty-two, mainly short, poems is Judith Rodriguez's fifth book and perhaps her best. Here is a poet very much in command both of her material and her manner: all the exercises, the experiments, have been done off stage, there is no poem here that is not a finished article.

She is a poet of the quotidian and one who sticks very closely to the evidence of her senses. Sight, sound, touch are her guides through the suburbs and the everyday exchanges which provide her with modest illumination:

> Neighbourhood
> Between lit rooms
> and a street's early darkness
> this air of treaty;
> the blinds
> taking in night voices,
> a careless tune,
> the neighbours' TV
> flickering across the way.
> Dog-bark confirms
> some understanding.
> Car-door wraps it up.

It is a pleasure, too, to note that these poems are populated with more than a poet's selves, a matter of some distinction from most current verse. There are other, and real, people here:

> Seeing
> Seeing things from the last time, many times:
> morning, a woman in a flowered dress
> among traffic and builders' trannies,
> and a little boy asking.
> They stop and look in the grass.
> They are earthfast, they are full of light, and now
> they are seen.

Exactly. There is a splendid, and amusing, poem *Laughter in fall* about a girl who needs always to be in love. There is considerable skill behind the open structure and lyrical pace of this poem. Another great success is the title poem. Heaven knows, the contemporary idea of feminist witches is rather an overworked, and strained concept but, nonetheless, the poem itself, about a visit to a show of Robyn Archer's, escapes from such typecasting with its big bold and mock-brassy rhythms.

My few reservations about this attractive book have to do with distinctions between verse and prose, an area admittedly very blurred by much contemporary writing. Free verse is due to be questioned rigorously and a call to order may be due, a call which may be applicable even to such a fine technician as Judith Rodriguez. Here is the end of *Words in autumn* printed as prose but with the line-breaks shown:

> Going off, the sky, just here the next life moved/
> behind a ridge with its mind on rain. CLEAR
> KEEP/my flooded lap of the roads words me,
> my words/deepening to clearness. Let them go.
> They'll read alright/further on downstream. Air
> aghast from the west/brings letters, a heath-
> twig pink and springy with rain/wild-lipped.
> Your trust, your winter energies.

Breaking this prose-poem into lines reveals little, if any, underlying verse structure.

But these faults, if faults they are, are few in one of the most enjoyable books of the year.

Mark O'Connor: *Modern Australian Styles; three lectures on verse and drama.* (Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, James Cook University of North Queensland, $3.)

This booklet (71 pages) number eight in the

Australian Literary Studies Monograph series, publishes three lectures, "The 70's Bubble in Australian Poetry", "Australian Poetry; the Achievement of the Last 10 Years" and "David Williamson and 'The Australian Sexual Problem' " which were first given as the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies annual lectures in August, 1981.

The publication of these lectures in this form raises serious questions about the responsibility for editorial and critical standards of the author and of the sponsoring authorities in the English Department of James Cook University.

Mark O'Connor is a well-known poet, respected for achievements in *The Reef Poems* (1973) and *The Eating Tree* (1980). A new collection of poems, *The Fiesta of Men* (Hale & Iremonger, $5.95) has just appeared in an attractive edition and we hope to review it later. Mark O'Connor's article *The Graying of the Underground,* an attack on the pretensions of much recent Australian verse was published in this magazine, no. 74, 1979, and the first of these lectures covers exactly the same ground, the pity being that an opportunity given by a second attempt has not been taken to tighten argument, extend and improve illustrations, and to correct error.

We published *The Graying of the Underground* even though we had serious reservations about its lack of extensive reasoned argument because there did seem to be a case to argue against certain poets, not so much for their uncritical promotion of each other's work (after all, what was new about that? Our files can show their elders at these tawdry games) but for the cynical manipulations of journals and anthologies to advance particular reputations without regard, it seemed, to any properly elaborated critical view.

Within shifting boundaries there seemed to be two main groups opposed to each other, one tended to publish in *Poetry Australia,* edited then by Les Murray, and the other in Robert Adamson's *New Poetry.* One of our concerns was that such were the pressures then created by the politics of these two groups operating on a Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne axis, that other individual poets, particularly those outside these cities, were often ignored by the journals and the anthologies.

This is not the place to rehearse the argument except to say that the quality of the comments made on either side, on the one hand Jamie Grant, Mark O'Connor and some of the younger Canberra poets, and on the other John Tranter (in the preface to his anthology), John Forbes (in an *ALS* article and in interviews) and others, seem to this outside observer to be more in the nature of promotional material than criticism, often marked by a nasty personal spitefulness, egotistic posturing and a curious lack of knowledge about quite recent cultural history. Sadly all these criticisms apply to the present booklet.

O'Connor's attempt to find parallels between the *Angry Penguins* poets of the 1940s and the Adamson-Tranter group is a feeble one and is soon dropped, not before, however, poking his tongue at one of the best of our war-time poets, Pilot Officer Donald Bevis Kerr, author of the posthumous volume *Death Be Not Proud.* Kerr was shot down in 1942. O'Connor calls him "a McDonald Bevis Kerr" and finds it hilarious that some thought highly of his work.

Another shoddy aspect of this booklet is the assumption that the poets of Adamson-Tranter group "controlled" the Literature Board:

> "By 1979 the only area the mediocracy (i.e. the wheeler-dealer side of the Bubble) still controlled was the Literature Board."

This is scandalously irresponsible, shocking enough that it be put before students at a University in the first place and even more shocking that the University chooses subsequently to print it.

As justification for this remark, and its repetition elsewhere in the booklet, O'Connor examines seventeen senior fellowships for poetry in 1978-79. He concludes seven were given to poets closely associated with the group he is attacking: Adamson (2), Eric Beach, Terry Gilmore, Rodney Hall (2), Rudi Krausmann, Tom Shapcott and John Tranter. What rubbish. Hall and Shapcott were of established reputation long before Adamson-Tranter. Eric Beach has published much more in *Overland* than he ever has in *New Poetry* and Tranter ignored him in his anthology. Gilmore and Krausmann I would classify, if forced as it seems I am to play this stupid game, as independents. O'Connor's paranoid Bubble bursts.

It is strange how things come together. At the same time as this booklet arrived Michael Sharkey sent me *Kangaroo IV* from U. of New England. This very lively literary magazine includes short interviews with Rae Desmond Jones and Roland Robinson on the takeover by an Adamson group of the Poetry Society. Robinson is still incoherent. Jones, whose piece is entitled *The Politics of Poetry* is sane and casual: "I can remember the thought actually occuring to me that it seemed to be a conflict between a number of political animals: which I was self-interested enough at

the time not to say." Quite. Les Murray also returns to this old story in a highly readable article *Inside 'Poetry Australia'* in the April issue of *Quadrant*. Murray's splendid avuncular prose rolls over the story like an Archbishop on wheels stopping every now and then to administer a blessing on this or that younger poet. A very amusing performance.

And, of course, most poets were never part of *New Poetry* (Adamson) or *Poetry Australia* (Murray) and never heard of the great takeover and could not care less. Both sides are exclusivist in the silliest of ways and a return to the reading of *poems* rather than gossip about *poets* is surely overdue. Michael Denholm and Graham Rowlands contribute further to this debate in this issue.

Just as I write this I find a new anthology: *The Younger Australian Poets* selected by Robert Gray and Geoffrey Lehmann. (Hale & Iremonger, $6.95.)

The editors write: "Our purpose in compiling this anthology has been to discover what survives of Australia's so-called 'poetry explosion' of the 1970s. Such discovery, for the reading public, has been hindered by an unprecedented degree of factionalism among the poets, which has meant that two previous anthologies on this subject were entirely partisan."

Unfortunately it is a great disappointment to find the anthology almost as blinkered, partisan and unhistorical in its references to modernism as its predecessors. Its selection is extraordinarily provincial and once again it is a question of "who you know". A full review will appear in a later issue.

Shelton Lea: *Broadsheets*. (Clough Press, Mountainview via Poowong, Vic. 3988. $2 each inc. postage.)

Quite a number of *Overland* readers are interested in this poet whose work is often printed in these pages. For some time now we have been receiving his new publications, pleasantly presented and designed offset from typescript: *Beyond Rehabilitation, Advantage Receiver, Tale of a Mean Man, Romantic Hero Obsolete, The Maggie Poem, Whodunnit?*, and, most recently, *The Ballad of the Latrobe Valley*.

While there is much here that would make a good editor reach for his blue pencil, and not only misspellings, these are small matters compared to the vigor and humanity of the verse. At his best Lea has a splendid way with a long verse line and, what is rare in contemporary work, a true skill at narrative.

Welcome to the first issue of *Ondobondo;* a magazine from Papua New Guinea. This is a very lively and interesting successor to *New Guinea Writing* of some years back. There is a nice mix of established writers like Russell Soaba and those publishing for the first time and it is full of lively illustrations. Published twice yearly (sub. K2, Literature Dept., University of Papua New Guinea, P.O. Box 320, University, Papua New Guinea).

It is a pleasure too to note the continual advance of *Neos* ($6 for 3 issues, Gleebooks, 191 Glebe Point Road, Glebe, 2037). This is a well-produced magazine for writers between the ages of 13 and 25 with much better standards than similar attempts. In this issue I like particularly the work of John Hawke and Richard James Allen.

Barrett Reid

UNDONE BY NOTHING

Kate Roberts

Thea Astley: *An Item From the Late News* (University of Queensland Press, $12.95.)

> "There was nothing outside that town.
> Is nothing.
> Can nothing be walled by nothing?"
>
> . . . "The town was ripe for Wafer. I was ripe for Wafer."

This is the ninth novel by a distinguished writer and, despite her claim, it is not a novel about nothingness (Sartrian or otherwise). It is a novel which deals with social and moral prejudice. It is a novel about greed, about love and jealousy, cowardice and boredom. It is a novel about Wafer, a thin, Christ-like drop-out, who, choosing to make his home near the small North Queensland town of Allbut, has to fight the greed for material wealth of some of those around him. His habit of avoiding clashes with the usual attitudes, and especially those towards wealth to be found in such a town, is challenged because he has found a huge sapphire. He will not say where he found it and this forces a conflict. Wafer also has to fight the jealousy of a woman who falls in love with him and who later refuses to help him because she feels wounded. Wafer just wants "to be", but he angers the elders of Allbut with his unacceptable humanitarian and other attitudes to the point where the elders feel that they have to take

action, drastic cruel action which makes the novel forceful and *in parts* chilling.

It is this partial quality which makes the novel frustrating to read. It is brilliant in parts yet so flat in others. Astley chases the theme of 'nothingness' through her novel. It surfaces as short verse or pronouncements by Wafer, firstly at the beginning of the novel and then whenever Astley feels that the readers have forgotten about the underlying intellectual framework. It is fortunate that this "nothingness" is not dealt with too often because it is not married very well to the fiction itself. The surrounding passages do not lend support to the isolated philosophical verse or pronouncements. The general flow is interrupted. The sad thing is it is so unnecessary. Astley is capable of making her points very forcefully through her fiction; she does not need the support of philosophical intrusions. That is not to say that none of the verse she uses in this novel functions as intended. Some of it works very well. For example, the narrator's musings are occasionally put in a verse form which by making them disjointed gives them reality.

Astley is at her best when she is describing the interactions of her characters. One can imagine her rolling up her shirt sleeves and really enjoying the task of creating characters and then making them work together. Her dialogue, when she is not trying to put "nothingness"' and "being" into her characters' mouths, is alive. It flows beautifully and is so real that occasionally I felt that I was part of the conversation, eavesdropping.

The plot is unfolded in an uncomplicated way. It is largely chronological though Astley does flash into the past to make a point or to flesh out a character. Astley also uses humor to draw attention to particular things. Her description of two aboriginals left by the side of the road stripped of their clothes by the bully sergeant of Allbut, is made more pathetic by their potentially comic situation. Later in the novel, a 'bull fight' is made more horrifying because it too has comic potential.

This novel with its vivid rendering of character and incident is yet punctuated by a stiltedness and uneasiness disappointing in a writer of Astley's experience. Her "nothingness" philosophizing seems her greatest undoing. I do not see any evidence of this in her other novels. She should, perhaps, leave it well alone. She seems to be most comfortable describing characters who are a little odd and sometimes eccentric, in many ways not unlike characters of William Faulkner. This is her strength as a writer generally and particularly in this novel. It is a strength she should concentrate on.

Kate Roberts, a student at Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education, has written to this magazine so interestingly on certain fiction reviews, we asked her to be a guest reviewer.

floating fund

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